

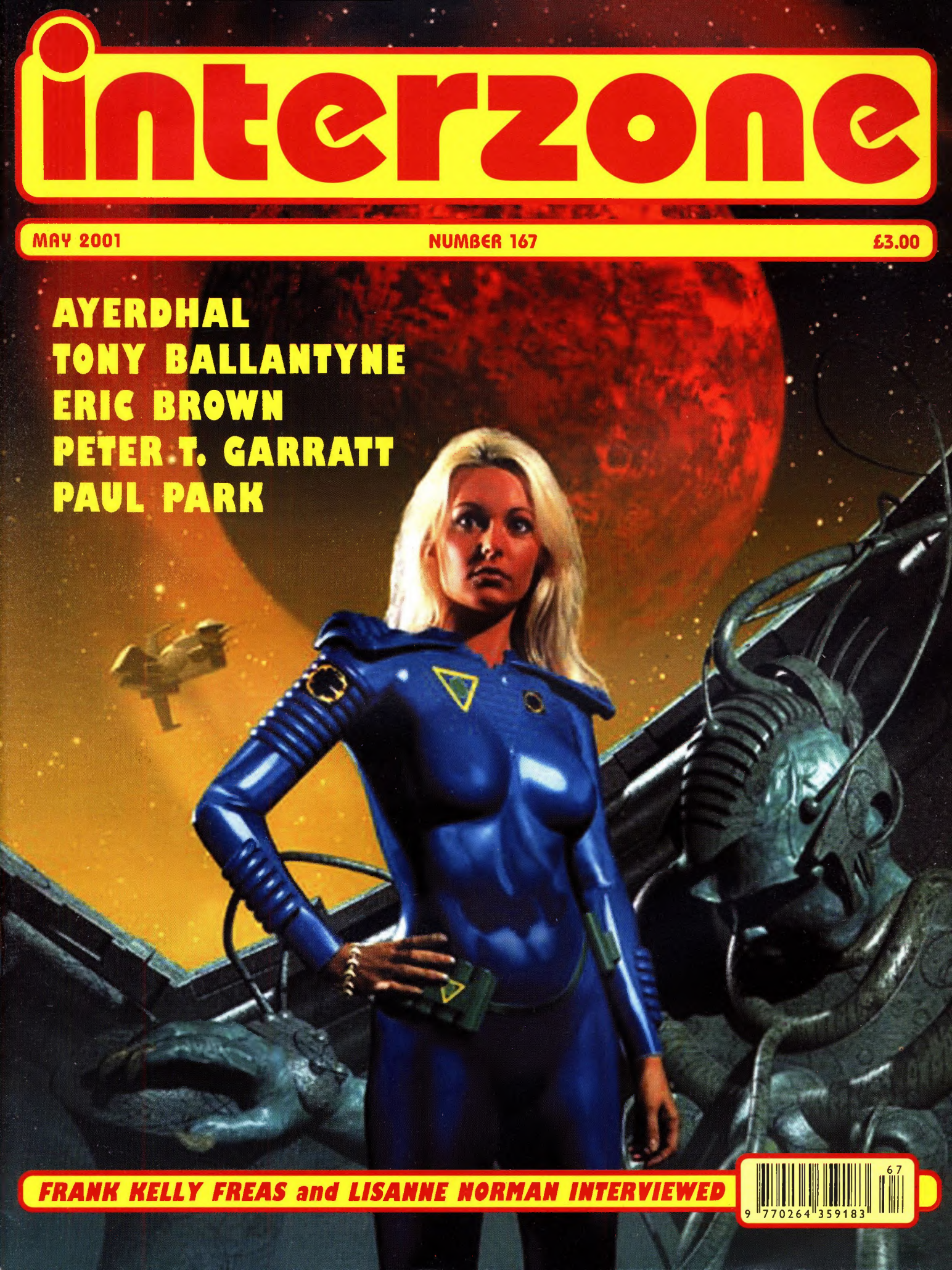
interzone

MAY 2001

NUMBER 167

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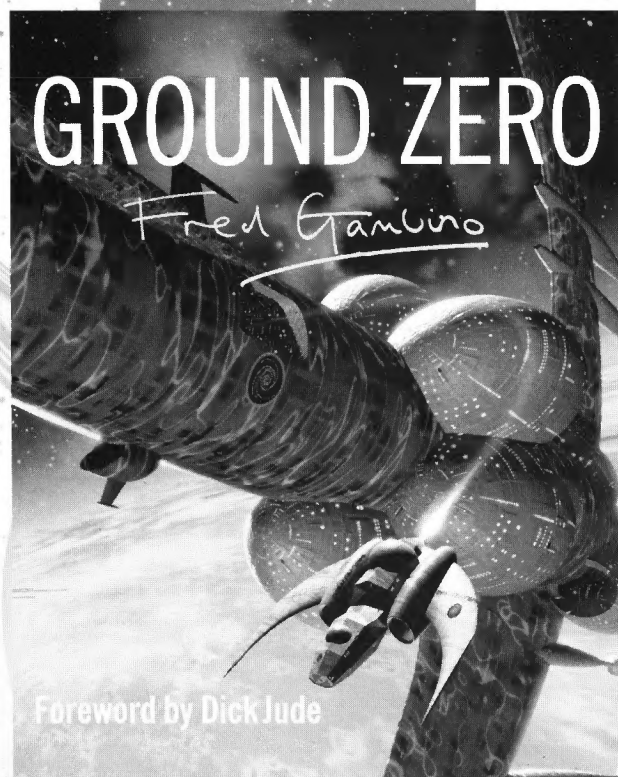


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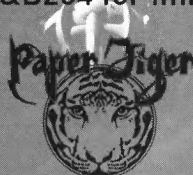
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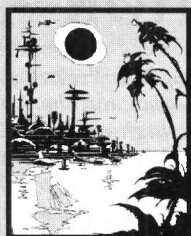
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MAY 2001

Number 167

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Cover by Fred Gambino from his book *Ground Zero*, courtesy of Paper Tiger

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Dear Editors:

At the risk of sounding like Disgusted Fan of Tunbridge Wells, or even Sad Fanboy of Tunbridge Wells, I have to ask how long Evelyn Lewes sat on her TV review in *Interzone* 165 before sending it in. Her comments about *Farscape* could only have been informed by a casual viewing of the very early episodes and it deserves much better than it gets at her hands. Strangely, it gets slightly less wordage than the two shows she actually admits to not having watched much of, *Xena* and *Hercules*.

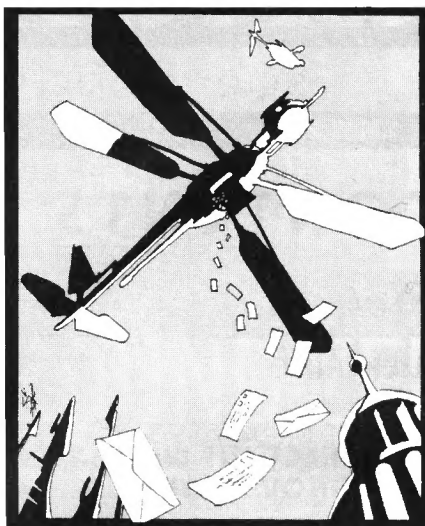
Farscape is, yes, a show with muppets, tentacles and a bald blue woman, and it did not get off to a good start at all. But the shows of the recently ended second series left all opposition far, far behind; in particular episodes like "Die me dichotomy," "The way we weren't" and the season finale, the three part "Liars, guns and money."

Farscape is ruthless with its characters – more so than any other show on TV, more so than a lot of written fiction. If a character sins or errs – and they do, none of them is perfect or indeed all that likeable – then they are made to face the consequences and follow them through with the utmost plot-driven logic and rigour. If they feel guilt or pain (Aeryn murdered Pilot's predecessor; Crichton murdered Aeryn...) – well, tough, they just have to cope with it. And unlike your typical Trek, the character is then changed by the experience. It is storytelling *par excellence*.

This is how any TV drama series, sf or otherwise, should be. And as for Ms Lewes's inability to encapsulate the plot "because I can't remember it", why, bless her pretty little head, it's only encapsulated every week in the opening credits of each episode. "My name is John Crichton, astronaut..."

The show also deserves a better mention because it includes one of the elements that were the *raison d'être* for Ms Lewes's article – a good, strong female character. In fact it has three of them. There's the blue one, there's the grey one and especially there's Officer Aeryn Sun, played by Claudia Black: renegade Peacekeeper, stunning in black leather and easily the inheritor of the Cathy Gale/Emma Peel slot of 30 years ago as an active action heroine.

The plots arise and follow through naturally, without any contrivance: you see nothing coming from a mile or even a yard away. (Compare and contrast with *Dark Angel*, for which Ms Lewes spends half her time pointing out all the credibility-straining plot devices before praising it to the skies.) Its



female characters don't need to be artificially strengthened by being given a boy's name. And it's *fun* – no five-year story arc, no deep morals, no taking itself too seriously. It is joyfully free of the fannish conventions and continuity points that do so much to cripple other shows. Instead we get a sense of exhilaration, exuberance, wonder; and of course a level of sex and violence that puts *Buffy* in the shade, though fortunately the BBC – like Ms Lewes – is unable to see past the muppets and has yet actually to spot that last element. And to anyone who questions exactly what kind of metabolism a creature must have to be able to fart helium – ah, lighten up. It's only a TV show.

Ben Jeapes

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Evelyn Lewes replies: It's rather a shame that Mr Jeapes should respond in this manner to a well-meant attempt at an overview that introduced attitudes I was hoping to explore in depth in possible later columns. After all, he is launching a new imprint, so he should surely be aware of the importance of first impressions. And yet he forgives the failings of *Farscape*'s early episodes while castigating mine. Well, I don't.

It may be that my column glossed over some things he would rather have seen covered in more detail. However, I was sketching in a very broad overview of what has been happening since television was last examined in *Interzone*. Yes, it is a while since I saw an episode of *Farscape*; but this is intended to be a commentary column, not a review, and my comment stands. Given the vast tide of fantastic fiction on television, no commentator could possibly watch all of it, and one has to be ruthless in choosing what to watch.

I never saw a series of *Star Trek* that didn't begin equally weakly; but the production values were high enough that they produced something I could watch, and sufficiently compelling to make me want to come back and watch the next week.

We should never forget that this is television, not radio, and that there is a visual element to the broadcast we are experiencing. My one abiding memory of an early episode of *Farscape* is of a line of people in rubber masks speaking lines they plainly had no feeling for. Next, he'll be demanding that I take Babylon 5 seriously, when it suffers from even worse production values.

It has been an abiding concern of mine that with many television programmes I can switch the sound of the television through the hi-fi into the kitchen and follow what's going on while cooking because there is no visual story-telling. I can never do this with good movies, or indeed with good television programmes. This is television, and I expect something to watch beyond silly rubber masks and still pictures. In, for instance, any *Star Trek* episode, there is almost invariably some movement, some additional visual story-telling, to accompany even the most static verbal exchange. Both *Buffy* The Vampire Slayer and *Dark Angel* feature similar production values – they are invariably ravishing to watch, even while the plots are sometimes terminally silly. My first impression of *Farscape* was that it wasn't too bothered with these values, and as such wasn't worthy of serious appraisal; no one in my social circle has offered any other opinion, so it has gone unchallenged. Until now. I will examine some episodes of *Farscape* and report back, and if Mr Jeapes has any favourite tapes he would like to share, he can send them via *Interzone*.

As for Mr Jeapes ad hominem comment, "why, bless her pretty little head," I have to ask what makes him think I am pretty, and what has this got to do with my commentary? Similarly, the blatantly sexist comment "female characters don't need to be artificially strengthened by being given a boy's name" is undermined in that the name "Max" is as epicene as mine. He would do well to remember that this piece was written specifically to explore the use of strong women characters in television fiction, and that such patronising irrelevance is behaviour that no such heroine would tolerate – so why should I? Or does Mr Jeapes think that, unlike his favourite television characters, he is excused from learning from his mistakes?

Interaction Stats

Dear Editors:

(Something I did ages ago, and I've been meaning to send...)

One of the most (potentially) interesting, important and useful parts of *Interzone* is the letters page. It's always the first thing I turn to. Unfortunately it tends to be treated rather casually, or allowed to fill up with single issues, or it gets left out altogether for two consecutive months – this happened both this year and last. I would like to see much more emphasis in the letters on previously published fiction – I want to know if other people loved or hated a story as much as I did, or if someone got a point that I missed, or whatever. I also think the authors would benefit greatly from the feedback – being told you came 17th in a story poll is not as useful as being told your main character needed clearer motivation, for instance.

In the year 2000, "Interaction" was made up of 3082 lines. Here are some statistics which I worked out one evening, bearing in mind the following: a) not all discussions had rigid boundaries; b) some lines were longer than others so I had to make some compensatory estimates; c) I excluded names, addresses and "Dear Editors" but included editorial responses; d) all

percentages rounded up to whole numbers.

Discussion of fiction in past issues of *Interzone* amounted to 31%. 30% of this (or 10% of the total) was written by a single person (me). Discussion of Gary Westfahl's articles came to 18%. I haven't worked out what percentage of this was due to people taking the bait or obviously missing the point.

Responses to reviews accounted for 24%. That's 730 lines, of which a staggering 196 were taken up with arguments over Chris Gilmore's comments about the Gulf War – with a further 123 lines of Gulf War argument to follow in the 2001 issues.

General discussions came to 17%, with discussions directly related to the sf field at large amounting to 9%.

I do have a life, honest.

Paul Beardsley

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Top Shelf Material?

Dear Editors:

Another Richard Calder cover story (IZ 166), with another lightly-clad woman. There's a top-shelf-load of magazines that do that thing better. I thought that after the reaction to "Malignos" (IZ 144) you would have learned.

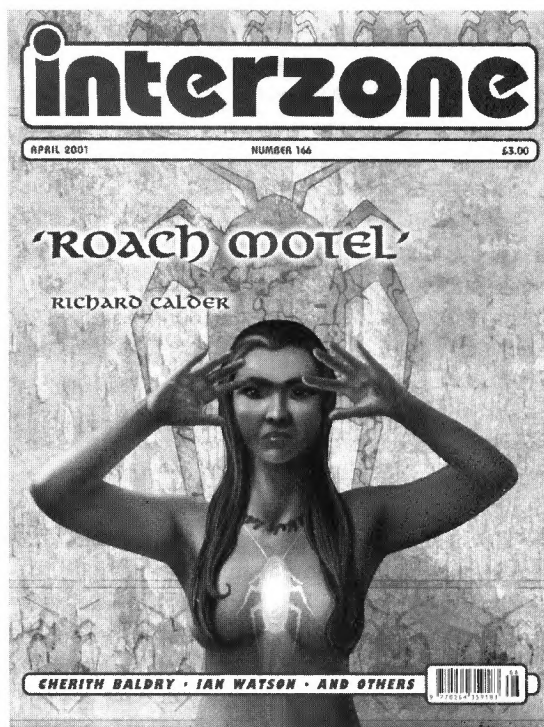
This seems to be an infrequent but persistent lapse of taste that can only harm your image, and that of science fiction in general. Please remind whoever is approving these covers that *Interzone* is primarily for science fiction, and being read by more men than women is not the same as being a "men's lifestyle" magazine.

Apart from that, keep it up, guys, the stories are still better than anything else out there. And if only Egon Ronay would tear a strip off MacDonalds the way that Nick Lowe could!

Mark Norman

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Editor: We're a bit surprised that you found anything offensive about Dominic Harman's relatively sedate cover picture for issue 166. As for the story itself, Richard Calder's "Roach Motel," it may have been strong meat – indeed it's one of the most erotic stories that this magazine has published – but legitimately so, in the context of the series of which it is a part. All of the stories in Calder's "Lord Soho" series are based on famous operas or operettas, and in this case the opera



concerned was Puccini's *Turandot*. (Opera lovers will know just what strong meat that was.) There is one more story in the Calder series to come.

Dear Editors:

Some votes for your story poll, 2000.

Stories liked:

"Ravenbrand" by Michael Moorcock
"The Window," "The Confessional" and

"The Train" by Zoran Zivkovic

"La Vampiresse" by Tanith Lee

"Adventures in the Ghost Trade"

by Liz Williams

"We All saw It" by Mat Coward

"The Fire Eggs" by Darrell Schweitzer

"The Suspect Genome"

by Peter F. Hamilton

"Liberty Spin" by Keith Brooke

Stories disliked:

"The Tambourine Effect"

by David Garnett

"The Unthinkables" by Liz Williams

"HMS Habakkuk" by Eugene Byrne

All other stories published last year were at least readable, or even likeable, but not outstanding. Please continue with current non-fiction content, i.e. book/movie reviews, columns (I still think Gary Westfahl has something to say), author interviews, letters page, and "Ansible Link."

Carry on. Much peace and prosperity.

Derek Grub

Australind, W.A., Australia

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FLICKERING

Ayerdhal

Civilians have no business with war. They don't know anything about it, they don't understand anything about it, and they'll never, ever be able to learn anything about it. I know, I'm a civilian.

Yet, I'm the one the Senate sent to the Trence system, when it still belonged to the Batiques and we had been at war with them for – my God! – for close to 600 years. Ever since they had exterminated the 60,000 colonists on Erex.

How many victories? How many defeats? How many thousands dead in 600 years? Does anyone have something more than rough estimates?

Along the Fringe, we lost all of our outposts and our waystations, and captured others. Then we lost some more, pilfered a few others, and advanced into their space. System after system, in skirmish after skirmish, we penetrated their defences and built our own, to prevent them from firing on our worlds.

We decimated entire fleets and grieved the loss of several of our armies. We fought in space. We fought in the air. We fought on the ground, in cities, in forests, in mountains, under oceans. We nibbled away at them, parsec by parsec, A.U. by A.U., metre by metre, with no guarantee that we would not have to give it all back up.

We've taken nine planets that could sustain life, 26 in various stages of terraforming, and over 1,000 bioregulated stations. Yet, we still don't know how far the Batique empire extends. We don't know how many systems they still control. We have no idea where their important bastions are. The Batiques never leave any

information of use behind for us. They manage to evacuate any individual with any astronomical training before we can capture them. Their culture doesn't seem to favour the sharing of knowledge.

We don't know much about the Batique civilization and the little we do know we obtained more by deduction than from anything our prisoners may have taught us. It would be more accurate to say that they've taught us nothing and that we've never found a way to circumvent them.

It all has to do with their communication systems. The Batiques have no auditory or vocal organs. They're not actually deaf, since they do perceive the activity of several undulatory particles. And they're not technically mute since their "brain" can modulate some of these particles. In order to avoid having to come up with new terminology, we agreed to refer to what they do as "telepathy." Yet Batique language and the other interactive stimuli are carried by agents that make the telepathy of our fantasies look downright stereotypical.

I had written several articles on the matter and it was part of the topic for my doctoral thesis, but I'm not really a specialist in Batique telepathy. I'm a xenologist and, since earning my degree, I've focused exclusively on communities descended from humans who were genetically modified to survive in a hostile environment.

In fact, I owed the orders for my mission in the Trence system to the parsec that separates it from Orave, a system formerly held by the Batiques with no life-supporting planets, where the Senate had just founded an xenogenous community. I was stationed there, research-

ing the interactions between the human community and the million Batiques who still lived in the three bioregulated stations our fleet had captured a decade earlier. The Senate was of the opinion that the month it would take me to transfer from Orave to Trence and the short week of time-lag I would suffer made me a better candidate than a qualified Batiqueologist.

You could say there was a certain urgency.

I wasn't allowed to catch my breath. I wasn't even given the three hours downtime usually granted after a trip in suspended animation. I was pulled out of the cyber-chamber, roused with amphetamines, and taken to the command post within 15 minutes of my arrival – or rather that of the courier that transported me.

I was met by General Geoff Lightner, Commander in Chief of the Sixth Federal Army, assisted by Division General Belam and Lieutenant-Colonel Lindholm. All three were waiting for me in the command-post rec. room of the *Leeri*, a very large cruiser that outclassed most flag ships. They introduced themselves very briefly, invited me to sit down in a lazy-boy, took their own seats in chairs that looked quite a bit less comfortable than mine, and then got straight down to business.

"Sorry to rush you like this, Professor Edgin," Lightner jumped right in, "but it's been over a month since we asked for a xeonologist to help us and... well you'll understand soon why we really don't want to waste any more time. The *Leeri* is currently stationed on a LaGrange point between Trence 6, a helium hydrogen jovian, and Trence 6-14, its most remote satellite, which the Batiques have been terraforming for several centuries probably. Six-14 is more like a small planet than a planetoid. Its atmosphere isn't breathable yet and its climate leaves a lot to be desired, yet the terraforming has progressed so far that the Batiques have been able to stabilize entire regions, isolating them under fields. Eight regions in all. And they've built cities there.

"It took us 16 months to clear all of the Batique vessels out of the stellar system. Sixteen months, during which we laboriously tightened our grip around 6-14, preparing for our siege. On the ground, the Batiques resisted another eight months. I won't go into the problems we've encountered. All you need to know is that we lost a lot of equipment and a great many men before we were finally able to destroy their principal defence systems. That was five weeks ago. Greg?"

Belam took over from Lightner. "In keeping with the Helmar Amendment, we gave the Batiques one hundred hours to lay down their arms. The offer was initially made planetwide, then city by city. I personally made sure that the surrender protocol was respected to the letter and Lieutenant-Colonel Lindholm made sure that our ultimatum was understood."

I interrupted, "We think that the Batiques are able to decode our maser broadcasts fairly well. But we're not sure."

"In any case, they sent us what we consider their standard acknowledgement."

"The fact that they acknowledge a message doesn't

mean that they've understood it."

"Professor!" Lightner was starting to lose his patience. "We've been using the same procedure for two centuries and it's always been effective!"

"Except for now... unless I'm mistaken?"

Belam and Lightner glanced at one another, then Lightner gave Belam the nod to continue.

"To a certain extent, something didn't work. We want you to find out what and why. Lieutenant-Colonel Lindholm will accompany you to 6-14 as soon as we've completed our conversation." He frowned, and his voice took on a serious tone, "Surely I don't have to remind you, Professor, that we are at war and that everything you see or learn is classified as a war secret. Apart from the three of us and the senatorial committee you give your findings to, no one... not even one of my officers... is authorized to discuss this matter with you. Any questions?"

I had so many questions that it would have been pointless to ask just one, at least before I had seen what they had gone to such great lengths to keep from me – so they wouldn't influence my conclusions, or so I guessed.

I heard Lindholm speak for the first time, when the shuttle that carried just the two of us landed.

"We're in a hangar next to the Batique field in one of the stabilized regions."

"OK," I replied.

We travelled blind, in a compartment without a single porthole. I didn't even see the pilot, who was isolated in the cockpit.

"The shuttle will wait for us here. The pilot will not leave the hangar."

"A war secret," I murmured.

"A sanitary precaution. You know, Professor, for the men who are fighting this war, a war secret is just an arbitrary classification. And here, it's nothing more than an open secret."

I raised my eyebrows. He shrugged.

"You'll understand."

The shuttle door slid open. We climbed down and walked across the immense, shadowy and poorly lit hangar towards an armoured door.

"It's an abiotic air lock. It keeps the Batique biosphere from our air generator. The two atmospheres are not all that different, but our hangar is not entirely isolated from 6-14 and we prefer to leave the micro-organisms for the biologists and their games."

Based on the spring in our steps and the feeling of lightness I experienced, I guesstimated that the gravity on 6-14 was about half that of Earth. In actual fact, it was 0.76 g.

In the airlock, while the abiotic rays cleansed most of the micro-organisms off us, we undressed and then slipped into insulated suits. Lindholm made sure my mask was adjusted properly and then adjusted his own.

"These are lightweight respirators. They filter out undesirable molecules. They can be a little bothersome and you can take yours off, if you prefer, without any risk."

I didn't ask him why were taking an unnecessary pre-

caution. The little I did know about the military led me to believe that, although there was no possibility of injury, the respirators were there to protect us from some slight inconvenience. He must have been thinking along the same lines.

"Still no questions, professor?"

I had already noticed that the respirator barely muffled his voice. Now, I observed that it did nothing to the clarity of his speech either.

"I haven't learned enough to know what to ask, colonel."

"Agmar... or even just Lindholm, but spare me the 'colonel'. It's been 'colonel this' and 'colonel that' every day now for three years and it's starting to wear a little thin."

"Feeling a little nostalgic for the civilian life... Agmar?" He hesitated for just a second.

"Military indigestion, Professor."

"Stoane... Dr is the only title I have."

The corners of his eyes crinkled just a bit in a smile. Then it was gone.

"Well, Dr Stoane Edgin, I have to admit that I would have liked to have met you under different circumstances. For now, I hope you have a strong stomach."

He keyed in a few numbers on a keyboard that hung on the wall and it opened in front of us.

About 100 metres from us, stood a dark grey lake, just slightly less sombre than the sky overhead. A forest ran along almost the entire rim, except for the few hectares occupied by the Batique city on the opposite shore. It was too far for me to make out more than a handful of buildings, but it seemed large enough to house over 100,000 individuals.

I had no time to take in the landscape and even less to identify the trees I saw. First, Lindholm walked me determinedly up the gentle slope that ran up from the lake. Then, I saw the first body. I found it hard to pull my eyes from the swarming mass that covered it.

"Batiques don't decompose quickly," Lindholm informed me. "There aren't many micro-organisms that find their cells tasty. But that one has been exposed to the air for a month and... well, he's not much to look at."

I don't know why. But I wasn't repelled by that cadaver, or the other eleven I saw near the landing. I didn't make any effort to go over to them, though. And Lindholm made a wide berth around them. It was all the easier for him since, unlike the two Batique boats, the military hydroplane was not moored to the dock.

We embarked and the Lieutenant-colonel steered for the city. We both remained silent during our short crossing and when we tied up at a wharf where a dozen Batique boats floated in their moorings.

"You don't realize it, but you're already in shock, and it's only going to get worse. Whenever you want me to, or when you can no longer control your emotions, I'll give you a tranquillizer injection."

"You're a doctor?" I asked, aggressively, my suspicion showing.

"Psychiatrist. That's the only reason I have the honour of accompanying you."

I let it pass.

"And how will you know I'm losing it?"

"You'll shake; you'll feel numb. It all depends on you."

"And if you yourself were to..."

"I took some tranquillizers an hour ago."

"Ah." I made a face. "Why didn't you mention it to me before...?"

"We didn't want to alter your judgement."

I won't describe the Batique city. The images I've retained are incomplete, blurred. I don't think that this particular city was any different from those I had viewed in holos, but I couldn't swear to that. The streets, in any case, were covered with a surprisingly plastic material. I remember it well, because I fell flat on my face and it wasn't my fall that caused me to faint.

Compared to what I later found in the buildings, there were only a few cadavers in the streets, with the exception of two ovoid towers that stood face to face in the heart of the city. There, the bodies were literally piled up, a mass of swollen flesh, swarming with larvae and insects. Even more than the repugnant view, it was the odour, which despite the filter, set off my nervous reaction, causing me to faint.

I was only out for a few seconds. The military and the Senate wanted me to be an efficient little tool and Lindholm's black bag contained more than a few minor tranquillizers. Although I felt as if I were walking outside my body, the cocktail he injected me with brought most of my faculties back.

When I came to, the psychiatrist was kneeling down beside me, looking distressed. I sat up and once again saw the pile of remains behind him. My reaction was weak, but immediate:

"Holy shit, Agmar! Why didn't you burn these poor unfortunates?"

He didn't reply immediately and I had the clear impression that he almost revealed something to me. But his self-control was too strong for him to let himself go in front of a civilian or to delve into confidences.

"So you could see things as they are."

Without the medication, I would have thrown up on him. Instead, I allowed him to help me up and I stepped around him to get my fill again of the bodies that lay a few yards from us. It's not just that I wanted to test how well the medication worked. I also wanted to make sure that I would never, ever forget this carnage.

"The ones inside are in better shape," Lindholm said.

"Why? They're living?" I replied, sarcastically.

His look was not one of reproach, just irritation.

"No, but the parasites are still confined to their internal organs and some of the bodies are quite intact."

"Perfectly dead, yet perfectly preserved, that it?"

If he hadn't been on tranquillizers, I think he would have hit me.

"It's just as hard for me as it is for you, Dr Edgin. Would you like someone else to accompany you as you conduct your study?"

I just stared at him.

"Listen, Stoane," he went on. "I've got 2,000 soldiers in the fleet's various infirmaries and I've five times that many confined to their quarters because they're unfit to return to their posts. None of them has been physically injured. You understand?"

I didn't understand. I didn't understand at all and it was obvious.

He sighed, "Come with me."

We avoided the towers. Lindholm told me they were administrative buildings. Then we made our way into the residential part of the city.

Unlike humans, the Batiques don't really build upwards and all of their homes are positioned horizontally. We had not found any large residential complexes on any of the planets we had taken, just individual homes scattered in the heart of gardens and parks. Sometimes their cities extend over tens of thousands of square miles, they place such a high value on green spaces in their residential areas. We presume that the primary cause for this "irrational" use of space lies in the practical aspects of telepathy (in terms of distance) as well as its constraints (lack of privacy). We also presume that the numerous and gigantic terraforming projects are the result of their need for space.

Six-14 was no exception. Each of its cities occupied several hundred hectares and none had 100,000 inhabitants.

Lindholm took me into several homes, but we didn't really visit them. It was as if he was satisfied with merely showing me the lifeless corpses, proving to me that the army had fulfilled its mission. He dragged me from one room to the next, occasionally doing no more than glancing through a half-open door. Then we would continue on our way to the next dwelling, this time settling for peeking in through the windows.

I don't know how many bodies I saw. Hundreds? Thousands? I was floating in a universe of unbearable odours and abject images. I was floating in my body, just above or a little to the side. I was floating in the mind-destroying cotton wool of psychotropic drugs.

Then I woke up. Either that or one of the chemicals stopped working.

We were heading towards a pyramid-shaped construction, about 20 stories high, that stood on a hill with fewer trees than the rest of the city.

"The control centre for the field in this region," announced Lindholm, "at least on the surface. The Batiques had set up their military headquarters in the basement. It's not the first time we've found a configuration like this one. They understood that we would not bombard the..."

"Wait!" I interrupted, almost shouting.

I turned back and, taking advantage of our privileged position above the lake and the city, I looked for the inevitable damage caused by confrontations on the ground. But I found none.

"How...?" I asked, and then stopped immediately to run into the nearest house.

The front door was wide open, but intact. It opened into a hall that in turn became an immense room, with a pic-

ture window that looked out onto a tidy garden. A stairway ran down from the hall to what must have been the main room of the house. From the top step, I could see four bodies on a sofa that faced towards the picture window. They were seated, their skulls leaning against the back of the sofa.

I hurtled down the stairway and came to a stop in front of the bodies. Four naked adults, their flesh still "solid." No signs of violence whatsoever. I reached out to turn one and examine it, but was unable to do so. It was.... incongruous.

"Poison," said Lindholm from the top of the stairs.

I looked up at him, unbelieving. He had placed his hands against the wall and was staring ahead, without seeing me, looking over my head and out through the picture window at the tranquil, happy landscape that was the last thing the four Batiques had seen.

"P... poison..." I stammered.

His eyes returned to mine.

"Many of them took poison. Others preferred to throw themselves from the tops of buildings or to drown themselves or to blow their brains out. Some killed each other or electrocuted themselves or... gassed... or..."

He grasped the wood of the handrail so tightly it cracked, then walked out of the house.

This time, I didn't faint. I simply fell back on my rear and stayed there, unable to lift a finger or bring the briefest thought into focus.

I stayed there over two hours, sitting on my backside, my mind as empty as those of the Batiques who had taken the time to contemplate their lives one last time before killing themselves.

No.

They had taken the poison before sitting down on the sofa and they had waited, surely weeping in their Batique manner, until the garden before their eyes faded from sight forever.

Outside, Lindholm was waiting for me, sitting on a step of the porch that surrounded the pyramid-shaped building.

"So, you finally noticed that there was no sign of combat, eh?"

I nodded.

"And you wondered if you had seen any injuries on the Batiques... some of them do have injuries, which they inflicted themselves, or which one of their colleagues caused. Few, overall... fewer than one in a thousand."

"They... they're all dead?"

Now it was his turn to nod. Some words are hard to say.

"How many?" I insisted.

He closed his eyes. "Almost one million... We only counted those in this region. After that we settled for making sure no Batiques had survived in the others."

"That's dreadful."

He opened his eyes and stood up.

"It's worse than dreadful, Stoane. It's an act of madness. Shit! An entire world killed itself! Do you understand that? Shit and shit again! Do you understand? A

million people, who had defended their planet tooth and claw for two years, all committed suicide within a hundred hours! They... They even killed their children!"

He pointed towards the lake.

"There's a sort of school over there. An enormous building. We counted 8,000 bodies. Fewer than five percent of them were adults."

He didn't need to be a psychiatrist to feel my despondency. And I was much more than despondent. He calmed down.

"I'm sorry. I would have much rather preferred not to give anyone this cross to bear, but we cannot settle for merely recording this madness in a report. We may be military men, but we respect more than the Helmar amendment, Stoane. We respect our adversary for the soldier he is and we treat civilians with as much respect as if they were our own. If this is the result of some collective psychosis or the consequences of some sort of religious conviction, we need to know it. And that's your job."

Yes, that's my job. Collecting information, sorting it, balancing it, analyzing it. But how could I ever hope to understand one million Batiques who... Who what?

I stood up.

"For seven centuries, tens of thousands of xenologists have spent their entire lives studying the Batique culture, Agmar. Never, either during the brief period of reciprocal tolerance or since then, have we made even the slightest progress. The little that our best Batiquologists claim to know is based solely on anthropic simulations. Our ignorance is so deep that, on each planet that we have removed from them, we park them in reservations where we no longer even take the time to visit them. There is no co-operation, no exchange, no negotiation between our two civilizations. And the only protocols we've ever managed to implement are military ones. I want to do my job, as you put it, but apart from the bodies, what material am I supposed to work with?"

He pointed his finger at the entrance to the pyramid.

"I think they left us a message."

I was flabbergasted. "You think...?"

"For the first time, they did not destroy everything that pertains to astrology. What's more, they left all of the instruments in working order. But there's something more intriguing. They made a hologram for us – a very precise representation of the galaxy. More precise, in fact, than anything we could have made."

He stepped ahead of me and walked into the building.

"You'll see," he said.

I followed him.

The entire pyramid was... My God! It was as if everything had suddenly frozen. As if, while performing the most banal daily duties, everything had suddenly died in a fraction of a second. From the peak to the base of the control centre for the field and on each level in the basement headquarters of the military, the Batiques were still at their posts. Dead. A little desiccated, a little thinner, but all as well-preserved as if they had simply been cryogenically frozen.

"They used the ventilation system to spread a gas,"

explained Lindholm. "It killed them instantly, along with every living organism. They're mummified."

He was more at ease than I was, of course. He wasn't shivering and he didn't spend his time looking behind him, but he didn't like the idea of spending several hours in this gigantic tomb.

I felt as if we walked several miles before we reached the hologram room. But it probably wasn't that far, even though the base of the pyramid occupied a large portion of the basement in the hill. We arrived by way of a corridor that opened above it, on a balcony that ran around the tower, but saw only a small portion of it. The rest was lost in the mix of shadow and light generated by the hologram.

In past trips to 3D stellariums, I had already seen impressive reconstructions of our portion of the galaxy. Yet, the Batique hologram made me dizzy. I couldn't tell you just how large the room that held it was since it was moving. All I can say for sure is that even on that scale, I was aware that I was nothing. Nothing, to the point that humanity as a whole was still less than microscopic.

We took a moving carpet, that ran down from the balcony, along the curved wall of the room, and reached the ground, under the Milky Way. From here, the impression was even more overwhelming. But it disappeared a few dozen metres later, which Lindholm forced me to walk, pulling on my sleeve. I walked blindly, eyes riveted to the sky.

Lindholm brought us to a stop and something drew my eyes back down. Something like the unpleasant sensation of being observed without my knowledge.

In front of us, so close I jumped, sat a Batique, in a chair with a very high back.

"He's dead," Lindholm felt the need to reassure me.

I could see full well that he was dead, but I had also seen that his left arm was resting on his thigh, four fingers pointing to the ground, as if inviting us to take a seat there.

Between the Batique and the two of us, under a glass plate embedded in the concrete, there was a second representation of the galaxy. This one could not have been more than three yards in diameter and at most 24 inches deep. The minuscule galaxy looked almost comical below its colossal twin.

Lindholm bent down and picked up an object I had not noticed: a perfectly translucent stem, about two yards long and less than an inch thick. When he picked it up, I expected it to waver and bend under its own weight. But it remained perfectly rigid. Without hesitating, he dipped it into the glass plate.

"It's an aerogel," he said.

He waved me over and showed me a segment of the stem under his right hand. The segment had turned opaque and now had several gradations, symbolized by lights of different colours. He placed two fingers of his left hand on the third gradation and pressed twice.

In the aerogel, the galaxy blurred, and shrank around the tip of the stem to the point of disappearing. A vague flash and the galaxy reformed from the point where it had disintegrated. No, not the galaxy, just a sector hold-

ing a few thousand stars.

"A piece of human space," commented Lindholm, "And part of the fringe."

He released the stem and grasped it again at the last gradation. Once again, he pressed twice.

I had the impression that the entire room had suddenly turned dark, then there was another flash (brighter, but still not blinding) and I understood. Above us, the giant hologram took shape again.

It took barely less time than in the aerogel and we suddenly found human space suspended above our heads.

"Can you find your bearings?" asked Lindholm.

I was dumbfounded.

"Yes," I replied.

And to prove it to him, I named the nine stars closest to our heads. Even if I had not been passionately interested in astronomy for my entire adolescence, those nine stars were easy to recognize. The farthest was the first that humankind had named the Sun. Around it, I could even make out Jupiter and...

"Holy shit!" I swore.

Lindholm dipped the stem back into the aerogel. Twenty seconds later, that portion of the galaxy shrank back in on itself, so tiny that it only showed the solar system and all of its heavenly bodies moving.

To my alarm, Lindholm guessed that I understood full well what he was showing me.

"I think you're starting to realize exactly what our problem is," he said. "They know the solar system like the tips of their fingers and they know all systems with the same accuracy... All of the physical and astronomical features are accurate to several decimal places!"

I glanced at the Batique in his chair.

"And we know almost nothing of theirs," I murmured.

"Wrong!" He made me jump. "We know as much as they do. At least we will know as much as they do once we've gone through all of the data this thing contains... and if the data is as reliable when it comes to Batique space."

"But..."

"But it would take centuries to record, analyze and verify everything this holo contains."

"That's not what I meant. What's of interest to me..."

I was finding it hard to put my question into words. "All right, this thing is a gigantic mine of astrophysical data, but what does it tell us about Batique space? It's not because we know about the existence of potentially inhabitable planets that we'll actually find them to be habitable or inhabited."

"Well, clues like that would be very valuable. But I mentioned a message to you, remember?"

It was something I wouldn't be able to forget.

"I think it's time you viewed it."

When I frowned, he replied, "It's a programmed sequence. I suggest you stretch out on the ground. It lasts about an hour. I'll come back to pick you up about 30 minutes after the end of the sequence."

"You..."

"That's what I suggest. In any case, I've seen it about a dozen times and I won't learn anything I don't already

know. That's not saying a lot."

He handed me the translucent pointer.

"The display is set for the right scale. All you do is touch the Earth with the tip of the pointer."

"That's all?" I had expected him to tell me that I had to touch a section of the pointer.

"That's it. We figure the Batiques made the procedure as simple as possible to make sure we understood that they intended this as a message. Fine. I'll leave you with Hermes."

"Hermes?"

Lindholm nodded in the Batique's direction. "That's his role, isn't it?"

It's hard to say exactly what I expected. Maybe I wanted to fulfil the dream of thousands of humans before me: to communicate with a non-human species, to be a privileged recipient or spectator. I don't believe I had any preconceptions, except for the idea that this would be a message, as Lindholm had suggested.

Initially, I was disappointed or, rather, dubious. Starting with long shots, then moving closer and closer, the first holographic sequence was long, an interminable astronomical presentation of the galaxy and, more specifically, the tiny portion our two civilizations navigated. It was a catalogue. Nothing more, nothing less. A methodical, orderly catalogue of the systems we exploited and the planets, satellites and asteroids we occupied. Theirs and ours. I had no doubt that this was of immense strategic interest to the generals. But it did nothing for me, apart from bore me.

The second part, much shorter, presented only an overall view of Batique and human space, in a very schematic manner, with no respect for distances and proportions. All I saw was stars – some larger, some smaller, depending on the strategic importance of their systems, colour-coded to indicate who they belong to. Batique space was shown in hot colours, human space in cold ones. The hologram didn't show our actual territories. In fact, the stars that made up the Fringe were symbolized by white. Rather, it showed our territories as they had been several centuries before one of our spacecraft had emerged in one of their systems.

Generally, several stars in the Fringe turned from white to yellow and from yellow to orange, on the Batique side, or from white to lime green to green, on the human side. Then a green dot appeared beside an orange star and the star split into two equal halves, each clearly one colour. Other systems went through the same transformation (the brief period of reciprocal tolerance, as I had called it) and one star started to flicker: yellow, lime green, yellow, lime green. Erex, obviously. Then, suddenly, it turned completely orange.

I thought of the mummified Batique in his chair, but didn't look at him. The war had just started. Erex started to pulse again, before turning completely emerald. We had reconquered it. Then the hologram told of the war of the Fringe, with its stars changing colours several times, finishing always with a cold tint, and the invasion phase, during which the stars became redder and redder as we

burrowed into Batique space, switched to green, with a few lonely yellow dots. The reserves.

Until Trence.

The hologram showed the Trence system from a spacecraft, emerging from its Oort cloud, approaching Trence 6. Then it circled the giant planet and stopped two light seconds from 6-14.

I suppose 6-14 looked like it actually did. All I saw was eight pale orange spots, displayed in false colours: the regions under atmospheric control. Several green lights started to dance around the planetoid and, suddenly, as an emerald spark touched them, the orange spots disappeared.

For ten seconds, nothing happened. Then 6-14 went completely green. The subjective angle of view expanded, taking in all of Trence 6, which also turned green, as Trence (the star) did, as soon as it reappeared in the hologram.

Then back to the overall view of Batique and human space in their false colours. A single orange star turned lime green and, on the Batique side, its closest twin flickered.

Orange green orange green orange green...

I stayed there, lying on my back, for a moment, glancing back and forth from the lights of the hologram to the Batique mummy.

When Lindholm came to pick me up, he found me hunched down in front of the mummy, hands furiously pressed against the armrests of his chair. I was weeping. The Lieutenant-colonel didn't ask me anything. He simply placed his hand on my shoulder and gently said, "The generals are waiting for you."

I stumbled several times on my way to the airlock. I didn't say a word to the psychiatrist, apart from refusing a new injection of tranquilizers. I tried to make my mind go blank in the shuttle, but I just couldn't. I wondered if I'd ever find peace of mind again. In fact, I'd found out what it meant to hit rock bottom. It was only as we walked past Commander Leeri's station, in front of the door to the rec. room, that Lindholm threw out a line to me. But the line was barbed and each barb had been dipped in deadly poison.

"Don't worry. They already have an idea of what you're going to tell them and the Senate is prepared. The entire space fleet is on the alert, simply waiting for the order."

I had to lean against the door frame and close my eyes for a few seconds to keep from losing consciousness.

"It will pass," said Lindholm.

He allowed me to take a deep breath before he asked for permission to enter the lounge. It wasn't enough to bring the colour back to my cheeks, but I had no right to be any less determined than Hermes had been.

It was even worse than I had feared.

I must have been frightfully pale, because Lightner greeted me with a compassionate smile and Belam had me sit down in the same chair I had used during our initial talk and gave me a glass of water. Lindholm stood at ease just behind me and I could see from Lightner's expression that he had given them a sign, probably ask-

ing them to take it easy on me.

"Believe you me, we weren't any less shaken up when we understood what we were dealing with," Lightner said. "You're the Senate's expert and we have to hear your conclusions as soon as possible. But if you need a few more minutes to... well, we'll understand."

I was unable to unclench my jaws. Expectantly, Lightner gave me a few brief seconds, then spoke up in a warm tone.

"Take your time, Professor Edgin. It's not as if you're responsible for what the Batiques wanted and no one could possibly hold you responsible for the sad confirmation you're bringing us."

Still, I was unable to react. So he decided to come to my aid.

"We already know that, by revealing the astrographic position of their strongholds to us, the Batiques are trying to draw us into a trap and that by revealing their very complete knowledge of our space, they're hoping to terrorize us, in an effort to make us throw ourselves into their net. We also realize that with this mass suicide, they're declaring total war. No retreat, no surrender. We'll deal with that. What we need to know from you, Professor, is the nature of these... these monsters who have triggered this holocaust. Are they political or religious fanatics? Do they use educational or hypnotic indoctrination? Can we dare to hope that we will be able to outwit them or turn them against one another? To what extent..."

I raised my hand to stop him. I found it hard to swallow, but I simply couldn't stand another second of his barrage of military rationalism. It was as if Lightner were more foreign to me than Hermes because humanity, for itself and in itself was something other than the human beings that made it up.

"Is this conversation being transmitted?" I asked mostly to test my vocal cords.

"For the Senators, of course," replied Belam, "by ansible. You can speak directly to them."

Oddly enough, I felt relieved. Well, relieved enough in any case to say what I had to say.

I stood up and took a few steps. Then, just as Lightner was going to start up again, I said in a weary voice, "The war is over, General."

The silence couldn't have been heavier if the universe had suddenly collapsed. I felt no remorse when I cut through it.

"That's the Batique message. And it's a distress call." I still found it hard to swallow. "You want this world? You want all our worlds? Take them. We can't stop you and we're not going to try to any more. We'll even give them to you free of occupants. In any case, we've known you a long time and for a long time we've known that we will not get along.

"Yet we tried. When you finally occupied the systems that we abandoned for you when you had barely discovered astronomy along the shores of the Nile. When you came to build your ant-hills in our parks. Well, we were wrong to believe that we could stop you. Today, we realize that we can do no more than slow you down, for

a little while. Well, a little while ends here and now."

My voice died, but it continued to resonate a few long seconds. I could see my words leap from face to face. Lightner, incredulous. Belam, beaten. Lindholm, like some fountain that had long run dry yet rejecting, out of habit, the pressure of the groundwater. I felt the echo race over parsecs, silencing humanity, through their representatives in the Senate.

"The war is over," I repeated "Because it takes at least two to fight a war and we have no more opponents. I don't know if victory can be any worse than this, but this is a bitter pill to swallow. I only hope that we will never forget the price paid by one million Batiques."

I requested permission to stay behind on 6-14 as soon as the Senators decide to withdraw all of our troops and install the Batiques that we had held prisoner in the reserves there. They granted it grudgingly, but without balking too much.

I've been living among the Batiques for five years now. I picked out a little house for myself in a clearing above the lake and I eat what I grow in my garden. There's nowhere I can't go. No door is closed to me. And I can take what I want without anyone stopping me. But the Batiques ignore all of my efforts to communicate with them and pay me no attention at all.

Last year, at their request, and after I had to fight with

the Senate, two xenologists joined me here. The three of us together haven't had any more success. I have to admit that it's the biggest failure of my life and I'm completely disheartened over it.

Yet, that's not the reason why I will go to the pyramid tomorrow and walk down into the basement at the time of day when large numbers of Batiques will be visiting it. Because they do visit it as if it were a mausoleum. And they bow down before the chair that holds the only mummy that was not incinerated.

Tomorrow, for the thousandth time, I will bow with them. Then I will sit down on the stool I made with my own hands from a tree in my garden and I will place my hand in Hermes'.

Lindholm promised that I won't feel anything and that the poison he gave me will preserve my flesh as well as that of the only Batique who ever spoke to me.

I know that his peers will understand my message.

(Translated from the French by Sheryl Curtis)

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A CONNECTICUT WELSHMAN AT ARTOGNOV'S COURT

Peter T. Garratt



Illustrations by Deirdre Counihan

When Nathan Lloyd returned to his windowless office after checking the Exeter sky for sudden rain, he found a rat on his desk. It was white apart from two black whiskers, one on each side of its nose. He assumed, as it showed no fear, that it wasn't a wild rat and must have escaped from the Psychology end of the old laboratory block, though no such animal had ever got as far as the Temporal Physics part of the building before. He hadn't time to return it without being late for the lecture, so he encouraged it gently into the plastic bin where it was able to investigate the remains of his lunchtime cheese sandwich.

His carefully prepared list of questions had gone missing. By the time he was sure it was nowhere on the desk where he had left it five minutes before, he was late, so he ran to the Arts block without putting on a coat.

Not every science postgrad sat in on Dark Age History, but none of the rest had a chance to sit next to Blodwyn Evans. She had glossy black hair, the deepest tan in the uni, and allegedly the shallowest swimsuit. She was waiting as Nathan ran up; but she said as firmly as her musical voice would allow: "Now, Nathan-Dai. In this lecture King Arthur does *not* exist!"

He said, confused: "But isn't there new evidence since last semester?"

"Evidence, Mr Lloyd? It's good to hear it's respected even in the United States of... Disneyland!" Dr Mary Quorn swept past him. She made a gesture between a start and a sniff as she noticed his T-shirt, with its "Sword in the Stone" logo, bought at Mouse World Rhode Island.

Nathan shrank. He had hated references to his dress sense since his first day at St Bede's Junior High, when he had turned up not knowing the school had a uniform.

Dr Quorn's lecture disappointed Nathan: she spoke of continuity of culture. How, he wondered, could the extirpation of a culture's language down to its place names equal continuity? Eventually, she sneered: "Most supposed histories of fifth- and sixth-century Britain are unreliable books of legends, written down centuries later. The phantom King Arthur was Welsh propaganda by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the most unreliable Geoffrey before Archer!"

Nearly all of the class laughed dutifully. Nathan felt isolated, as he so often had in his life, but was impelled to say while Dr Quorn was milking the laughter: "Didn't you say last semester that this Geoffrey *invented* Arthur? Isn't it a minus for your theory that in the summer vacation the archaeologists at Tintagel, Arthur's invented birthplace, have found a stone marked 'Arthnu'?"

"Oh, Artognov! 'Artognov, Father of a Descendant of Col,' no less. Well, I suppose the name *could* be pronounced something like 'Arthnu,' if we had any real evidence about pronunciation in that period."

Blodwyn said: "Artognov could be a Dark Age Russian country gent from a very early play by Chekhov, facing a very long wait to go to Moscow!"

The room dissolved in laughter. After the lecture Nathan accused Blodwyn of sucking up to the staff and to the English: "Uncle Tom Caerphilly!"

Without pausing in her rush towards the coffee bar, she

snapped: "You talk about Welsh and Welshness, but you were brought up in Hartford!"

He had to scurry after her: "Connecticut! I'm part of the Welsh diaspora."

"Hartford *Connect-i-cut*! You think Catatonia's a disease and Ryan Giggs is a firm of rock promoters. Welsh is a state of mind, not a race!"

She ran up the steps to the Union. Her skirt looked demure in class but was split so far up the back that he could see her summer tan lingered to her panties. A youth was pulling the door open: she darted in, flashing a bright smile as if she was Elizabeth Tudor and he Sir Walter Raleigh. By the time Nathan got inside, she had bought two coffees and found seats at a crowded table. "Do you know Nathan? He's trying to be Welsh, but he doesn't play rugby. He's always having a try, in fact he's very trying!" They laughed, and Blodwyn changed her tone: "Boys, Nathan is an example for you, a physics postgrad with a degree from Har-*vard Conneti-cut*. He's what you'll be if you study a bit more and booze a bit less. The degree of your personal beer handle isn't the only one that gets lower in proportion to the amount of beer it pulls!"

A youth in a red shirt inscribed "Ryan Giggs" was beside Nathan: he didn't like any other sport, so he doubted he'd enjoy rugby, but tried to be polite:

"What Rugby football team do you support?"

"This is a real English... Association football shirt! Soccer! Manchester United!" They all tittered, then the youth said more pleasantly: "So what kind of physics is it you're researching?"

"Well, Temporal Physics. It obviously has to be a totally theoretical study."

Blodwyn added: "He'll be working for NASA when you lot are applying for jobs as beer tasters!"

"It's a whole lot more to do with time than space. You see..."

"Time traveller! He's studying for a Doctor Who-erate! You could work for... let's see... National Unnatural Time Authority! NUTA!"

Blodwyn poked fun at everyone, and everyone but Nathan laughed. Her dark hair fell to the collar of her thin yellow blouse. As well as a black skirt, she wore a black belt and a clearly visible black bra. She looked like a Queen Bee, and he felt like saying so, till he remembered that the Queen Bee mates only with drones. Meanwhile, "Ryan Giggs" was saying: "So what brings you to Exeter? It's a bit out of the way for a Harvard Time Lord, isn't it?"

"There aren't so many places for Temporal in the UK, and none in Wales."

"Ah!" Blodwyn said. "He's looking for *King Arthur*. He knows Devon's as good a place as anywhere. A Connecticut Welshman in Artogov's Court!"

Nathan just said: "My Welsh roots are important to me!"

He finished his coffee and went to the balcony. What he had always lacked and looked for was a sense of belonging. No one understood why Welshness felt so vital.

School had been an ordeal. He hated sport and could only get down to studying subjects which weren't fashionable. He knew Welsh and even Latin but not a word of French, German or Russian. Those languages sang him no poetry. His mind was on a mystery tour which baffled his tutors. He could never calculate baseball averages and had been banned from keeping score... a pity, as he was even more publicly hopeless on the diamond. He didn't even read science till he picked up a job lot of second-hand first-year college texts in Welsh on a teenage holiday in Bangor, Gwynnedd.

His grades improved steadily. Mastering Welsh became such an enthusiasm that he got on the mailing list of every book dealer in the Principality. In any subject for which he could read a Welsh version, even if out of date, and then compare it to current English texts, he got straight As.

The view from the balcony was good almost to Dartmoor. The weather had held, and the greenery had that bright richness one usually only sees in high summer, even in Devon. The air had a magical quality: anything could happen. It jarred to hear English voices: if only they spoke the root-language! He had a few tapes, but it was rare for him to persuade Blodwyn to speak it in her perfect musical voice. She *had* asked him to listen to her translation of Dylan, and he had looked forward to her version of *Under Milk Wood*. "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Mr Tambourine Man" hadn't had quite the same impact.

Still, she had pointed out that Devon was once part of Wales, holding out for nearly three centuries after the English barbarians landed in the east. He went back into the coffee bar, but more drones were swarming around her, and their conversation buzzed like a saw punctuated by laughter.

Back at the ten-by-twelve office which Blodwyn called his personal Gallifrey, he remembered the rat. It was sitting contentedly in the bin, but as he had no use for a rat, he went to Psychology. As usual, the Waiter was in a small office between the two departments. It was the only part of the building in which smoking appeared to be allowed. The Waiter had long, sandy-grey hair and an odd beard. He had set out from London 30 years earlier to go to San Francisco, had reached Exeter, and was still waiting for the right moment to complete his journey. In the meantime, he had acquired a degree and a job fixing assorted problems for various departments. He shook his head firmly as soon as Nathan mentioned the rat. "They can't get out. Rat-lab's too secure."

"Well, it got into my office some damn way. You have to have it back."

"Can't do that. Contamination."

"Contamination with what? My office is totally hygienic!"

"Experience. They all start the experiment with the same experience."

"So what do they do in these experiments? Learn mazes?"

The Waiter shook his head. "Shit mostly. Did you find many boluses? That's Psych-talk for little lumps of shit."

Nathan shook his head thankfully, and the Waiter went on: "Prof. Broadthirst is 'Investigating the Roots of Mental Illness' by breeding two types of rat. One lot are totally neurotic and crap whenever they experience anything new. Then there are the non-shitters. Sounds like you got one of those. Anyway, I've got a deal: redundant rats make cheap pets. A tanner gets you a cage and a page on care of the rat."

Nathan reluctantly felt for his money, saying: "You mean some poor bastard research assistant spends his time counting these... boluses?"

"They're getting creative at it now. See, Prof. Broadthirst won't accept he's done enough, but he's not here much. Conferences. So they extemporize the results. If he does show up, they look busy and get a rat out. Non-shitter, obviously. Anyway! How's the time-travel business?" Nathan started a non-committal answer, and the Waiter went on: "There's a bloke goes down the John Bull, treasure-hunter, well, metal-det... won the Pools lately. He's looking for someone in your line of business to do a job for him. Money up front."

"In *my* line?" Nathan couldn't imagine what job some low-life treasure-hunter could have for him. The only one that sprang to mind would be a trip to the States with a false bottom to his case, and while not rich, he wasn't stupid.

"Yes. Sit down. You ever heard of a place called Merlin's Field?"

He hadn't, but anything remotely Arthurian interested him. "No. Where?"

"Near Southampton. A site our man wanted to work. It's an odd story, but it could be true, and there's money in it. He was there last month. Saturday night was the best time to work the field, no interference. He bought a paper and read football results in the pub till it was dark, then got to work. At first, he didn't have much luck. Odd bits of rusty metal, could have been bits of old weapons. He said the Officials, as he calls them, go mad over people digging up that kind of thing unofficially, but he couldn't see they'd be worth much to anyone. Then he found the first of the crystals."

Nathan was horrified. He knew, from sitting in on the Dark Age lectures, that official archaeologists had every reason to fear the activities of treasure-hunters, digging through layers of evidence too subtle for them to recognize, in search of bits of rusty metal. The Waiter continued: "The crystal gave a clear signal on the metal detector, but it didn't look like metal to him. Still, he put it in his bag in case it turned out to be worth something and got back to work. He didn't have to look far to find the next crystal."

"What, a similar one?"

"Identical, he says. Now it gets weirder. He decided to keep them as a pair, but as soon as he went to put the second one into his bag, something happened that blasted him literally into the middle of the last week."

"You mean an explosion?"

"No, just a seriously weird feeling. He just blinked, and went from darkness to the sun being in the sky. It was late afternoon, as if he'd somehow been standing there

almost round the clock. He panicked, sprinted out of the field, couldn't find his van, and wandered round till he found some shops.

"He decided to buy a paper and have a pint till it was dark enough to go back to the field and find his gear. The next odd thing he noticed was the shop only had the Tuesday's papers, from the week before. When he got to the pub there was a TV on and he couldn't understand why they were showing the last Tuesday's shows. He'd seen some of them before. Anyway, by the time he'd had a few pints he felt a bit of a fool, so he went back to look for his stuff. He couldn't find any of it, or even the holes he'd dug."

Nathan assumed the Waiter and his friends belonged to a generation of Exeter ne'r-do-wells legendary for their enjoyment of LSD, *Doctor Who* and rough cider, and he presumed some combination of these had led to the whole story, but it seemed politic to say nothing. The Waiter went on:

"He tried to work out what was going on. Had the crystals done something? He realized he still had the paper with the next Saturday's football results. He filled in a Pools coupon and sent it off, then searched the paper for winning lottery numbers, but there weren't any. He stayed in Netly... that's the nearest town... till the Sunday, when he went back to the field and found his stuff."

"He reckoned the crystals didn't do anything till he brought them together. They'd been buried ten feet apart. He tied one to the front bumper of his van and one to the rear, and he got back home OK. He had won the pools, but not as much as he'd hoped. This is where you time experts come in. He wants to do it again with lottery numbers, but he's no idea how these things really work. If he gets it wrong, crystals too close together perhaps, he could wind up back in some Godforsaken time in the Dark Ages that no one would want to get stuck in."

No one except Nathan. He didn't believe a word of the story, but wouldn't have any qualms about accepting some of the treasure-hunter's ill-gotten gains to check it out. Even so, when he took his rat home that evening, he decided to call it Hank, after the original Connecticut Yankee who went to Arthur's court.

There was a note in the door from Blodwyn, inviting Nathan on Saturday's field trip to Tintagel – "maybe taking in a pub and perhaps a beach."

Next morning the Waiter, who seemed to be acting as an agent for the treasure-hunter, gave Nathan an advance of £500, then separately delivered the two crystals. They were purple with gold flecks, almost translucent like large glass gems. They didn't look at all metallic. Nathan enlisted the Waiter's help to construct an apparatus to keep them apart while bringing them slowly closer together: a gantry with the crystals on runners on a steel rail, which was over his desk. In between was a device to drop a small weight onto a scale, both rigged to timers.

The first results showed that when the crystals were brought to a distance of 2.15 metres the weight would land on the scale before it left the dropper. By Friday, he had enough data to calculate the distance that would

push something back days rather than seconds. He went to see the Waiter.

"In theory this could be seriously important research."

"You mean that in practice it's horsepiss?"

"I mean be patient. If your man wants results tomorrow, he could wind up somewhere other than yesterday!" Nathan made to go, then said: "By the way, that rat you sold me. It seems to be pining. Do they like company?"

"Sometimes. But we're not selling at the moment."

"I like the little furry critters. I'll make it £15."

"Non-shitter, I suppose!" The Waiter led the way to an area full of cages of white rats. Nathan at once recognized Hank, though the black-whiskered rodent didn't respond to him in the way its alter ego at his flat now did.

"I'll have this one." He took Hank and hurried to his office. He set the apparatus so the crystals would move in a single surge to a point calculated to send the little pioneer back to five minutes before the start of the lecture four days before. He stepped back to the doorway and made the signal. There was a moment of strangeness, of something not quite right, and then Hank was gone. All there was on the desk was the notepad on which he'd jotted questions for Mary Quorn four days earlier. The crystals had transferred two items, a rat and a pad, between points in time.

Nathan ran home. The alter-Hank was standing up in his cage, pleased to see Nathan, or at least hungry. Nathan had made history. He still didn't think of changing it. He fed Hank, then got down to some purely theoretical calculations. There was a consistent ratio between the movement of the crystals and the backward displacement in time. If that held, the maximum backward "range" of the crystals would be just under 15 centuries. Of course, it was a purely theoretical range. How could it be anything else?

Saturday morning was warm for fall. Blodwyn drove up in a mini-bus full of students in summer clothes: she wore shorts. Nathan put on a T-shirt she had brought back as a present from Greece. As they drove west, the soccer fan in the "Ryan Giggs" shirt asked: "So, if this King Arthur really did exist, what relation was he to the present Royal Family?"

"None, probably!" Blodwyn replied. "Arthur was Warlord of the Welsh. We ran most of Britain in those days, not bad for the few of us! The English were just barbarian settlers, revolting mercenaries. The royals trace their line to the first king of the West Saxons, that's Cerdic son of Elesa. But he had a Welsh name, he was just an under-king who ruled the bit of Hampshire round Southampton Water with permission. There's a lot about him in this." She waved a copy of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. "He claimed to be descended from the god Woden, but his biggest victory was over the Isle of Wight!"

Before Tintagel, they visited a pub attached to a farmhouse. Rough cider was the main attraction. Nathan enjoyed it and drank three pints. But at Tintagel, he found it hard to concentrate. The story was complex, layers of English ruins built on older Welsh ruins. The

"Artognov" stone wasn't on display, only souvenir shirts. Nathan bought a sweatshirt and Blodwyn a T-shirt. The fortress was on a headland overlooking the rich blue ocean. Surf was up, and he could see tiny figures riding the waves. Someone suggested a move to the beach. On the way down, "Ryan Giggs" started to ask him about his time project, and whether it could help the archaeologists understand the ruins, and he found himself drunkenly answering that he was working on tech which could maybe send something to the past, perhaps a camera.

"Why not send a man?" Blodwyn asked. "Why not you?"

"I'm not sure I could get back," he answered, realizing for the first time that he was sure he could get there. He said loudly: "If I did, I'd teach this Cerdic the Underking a lesson. I'd teach him to speak Welsh, to start with!"

They all laughed, though he hadn't made a joke. Someone read from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: "Listen: 'Hengist fought against the Welsh: and the Welsh fled from the English as one flees from fire!'" Nathan felt like hitting the drunk, but Blodwyn ignored him. They had reached the beach. It was warm as the English summer. Blodwyn dumped her bag on the sand and started unbuttoning her blouse, shouting: "Bonus swim, everyone. Could be last of the year!" She shrugged out of her blouse, kicked off her shoes, and started to unzip her shorts. She was already wearing a white bikini with red Welsh dragons. Nathan couldn't help staring. This was something he had always dreamed of, but not surrounded by half a dozen drunks, all clumsily following her example. She noticed he wasn't doing anything, and said: "Everybody in! You too, Nathan!"

"I forgot my costume."

"We'll have to do what we did in Greece in the summer. Everything off!" She reached behind her back and unhooked her top. Her breasts swung out like a model's, hardly sagging. Her deep, even tan was as good as her word: she had clearly made little use of the top that summer. Nathan tried to move his eyes, but couldn't. She turned to him and said: "You'll have to use your TARDIS to go back to a time when they all swam in long-johns. From bathing machines!"

"You think all this is a joke? Take it from me, Lady, I'm deadly serious. I could go right back to a time when to be Welsh meant something, when Arthur could still have driven the English out of..."

"You're so irritating! Like the Irish Americans who support the IRA!"

"Don't all Irish support them?" he asked, then faltered as they stared. The hot day cooled as fast as an ill-informed student being doused with scepticism by Mary Quorn. "I just want to change a little bit of history, help Arthur..."

Blodwyn came nearer, so close he could smell her perfume, not that he knew perfumes, and hung her bra with its dragons round his neck, saying: "Sir Nathan, will you wear my colours in your helm, when you joust at Camelot?"

There was a shop called the Treasure Chest. It had a sign

of a girl in a gold bra with a metal detector. The treasure included detectors, weapons and military memorabilia, books and oddments with pictures of Nazis in swastikas. The man in the back of the shop wore a leather jacket and tie. He had suspicious eyes, a ram-rod stance spoiled by double chins, and neat iron-grey hair. Nathan said: "I'm a coin collector. I'm interested in anything Roman."

"Difficult. All finds are meant to be reported. Any special period?"

"Late Roman if you have any."

"Late's possible. Very late Roman are supposed to be so rare, that if you report them to the so-called experts, they'll say they're fakes."

"Good fakes would be OK, if you have any."

"I have late Roman coins, even a few early Byzantine. They're not supposed to be found in Britain, so they can't be illegally dug!"

He opened a safe, which held boxes and an old revolver, selected a box of small coins, mostly gold or silver. "Mostly Honorius, early fifth. But a few rarities. This is Romulus Augustulus, the last Western Emperor. The only one ever found in Britain! And these are later still, Byzantine Emperor Zeno. Not completely unknown, but very very rare!" He noticed Nathan's eyes flicker to the gun in the safe, and then to one in the display, and took the latter down: "Interesting item. Antique muzzle-loading revolver. Colt, in fact."

"Don't you have strict gun control here?"

"Not on antiques. Muzzle-loading is acceptable."

Nathan spent his £500 advance on the coins and the revolver, plus ammunition. Where he was going, a pocket full of crumpled paper would buy a lot less. He went to his flat and packed: sleeping bag, warm clothes, torch, supplies, tea and coffee, luxuries he might never otherwise taste again.

Hank was agitating for food. He thought of taking the little pioneer with him, decided it was an experiment too far for any rat, even a non-shitter. He filled the food and water hoppers, then left a note for his landlady: if he had not returned by Monday, Hank was to be given to Blodwyn Evans.

At the lab, he wrote a short account of his research to date and put it in his supervisor's pigeon-hole. He wrote it in Welsh. If he was unavailable to report in person, that was the language it would be read in. He set the apparatus to rush the crystals down the Time Gantry to a point only a few inches apart. He did not hesitate. His whole life had been a preparation to save a language and a nation which had lost the will to save themselves. He would storm forward (well, backward) like Ryan Giggs running out of the scrum to score a try. He got onto the desk with his pack and keyed the trigger. There was a moment of cold darkness, a sense of things not-quite-right. Then he realized that above, where the fluorescent lights of the office had been, was a sky bright with stars.

He was holding the centre-point of the gantry, almost swinging from it. The desk was gone. He thrashed his legs, and found something fairly solid at full stretch below. Gingerly, he let go of the gantry pole with one

hand and reached for his torch. It was in his back-pack, and he had to use both hands and a good deal of wriggling to get at it. He found he was crouching in a hollow shaped like the inside of an egg-cup, with no top. He remembered the crystals swapped things between times. In this case, he had been swapped for a seven-foot sphere of soil. It was a good thing he had no plans to re-visit his office.

The surface of the hollow was quite smooth, except for holes from which bisected worms were wriggling. With a curse he threw his backpack over the rim, then hauled himself after it by main force. He hadn't come this far to stay in a hole in the ground a moment longer than necessary.

He had no real idea of when, or even where, he was. The stars were bright and the air very clean, the pure air of a Welsh Britain that had never been polluted by the English and their Industrial Revolution. The stars looked somehow different, but he was no expert on the patterns of the constellations, let alone their supposed movements over time.

He was just starting to feel cold when he noticed something in the east. Before long the pale, tranquil turquoise of dawn was spreading over the sky. He was standing on the side of a hill which looked familiar enough to be the one on which the university would someday rise, but no buildings at all were visible. To the south and west the land fell away towards dense woods. He could see no sign of human life, though there were sheep on the hillside. Looking southwest he could not see the city, and he realized, with a start that nearly made him fall back into the hole, that he might have projected himself too far into the distant past, to a day before men lived on the Earth.

As the light grew, and birds began to sing, he tried to remember the line of sight of the cathedral spire. He walked a few paces to get a view round a clump of trees, and suddenly the city sprang into view... not such a city as it would become, nor as Byzantium the Golden must already be, but a little toy-town city in the valley, more like a large village, but surrounded by whitewashed walls, behind which plumes of smoke were starting to greet the morning. He picked up his pack. It was time to go to, not Exeter, to Isca Dumnonii.

Something glittering caught his eye. The long arm of the Time Gantry still lay across the top of the hollow it had created for him. The crystals had returned to their original positions eight feet apart. The gold flecks in the clear crystal were glowing far more brightly than the dawn light diffused in the sky could account for. He realized this was as strange a device as anyone had ever used to jump blindly, wondering if he could be projected further into the past if they moved again. He secured them to the ends of the shaft with twine, put his pack on his back and the Time Rail over his shoulder, and set out into the new morning. "No," he thought. "The old, old, morning."

He came to the road early, before the sun was showing above the hills. It was the first sign of civilized life he had been able to examine closely. It was raised on a low bank, kerbstoned, and metalled after a fashion with gravel.

This was overgrown with weeds and worn deep into the underlying cobbles by ruts. He thrilled to the realization that his calculations were nearly exact: Roman engineers had built this road and later ceased to maintain it. Somewhere in the east, the enemy he had come to dispatch would be waiting.

The road ran straight for a while, then swung left. He rounded the bend as the sun rose, and found himself blinking at a flash of red light from a building immediately ahead of him. It had an imposing facade with a porch of columns, and a pane of glass in one of its windows, though most were broken. Excited that civilized life continued here, he hurried towards it. As he got closer, he was disturbed by the first sound he had heard louder than birdsong, and a rank, unpleasant smell. The villa seemed to be full of squealing, grunting noises, and these were soon joined by the barking of a dog. He approached more closely, aware of something odd about the building. Just as the smell was getting unbearable, he realized he could see sky through the broken windows. The roof had collapsed, and as he went past it, he realized the side walls had also, mostly not standing above the window-holes. Only the facade remained, perhaps buttressed by the porch, and the place was being used as a pigsty. At the back he could see smoke rising from a small out-building, but the dogs and pigs were making such a racket that he thought it wisest not to approach it.

He hurried on towards the city, past more tumbledown farms. Then he saw his first people. Two men in green check capes and leggings emerged from a round, thatched building ahead of him, one of them herding some pigs down the road and the other pushing a handcart. Closer to the city, he could see other herdsmen, and a few carts drawn by oxen or ponies no bigger than Shetlands. Not far ahead, a couple of carts had stopped in front of a square building which had kept its roof. A large man was serving the drivers cups of drink, and he could smell bread baking and pork frying. It was very tempting to stop and eat; but he recalled he had no idea how to make an order in a Dark Age roadhouse. Would they accept his money, or did such a simple place use barter? He didn't know, and he realized his gold, silver and bronze coins were mixed together in his money belt. He pressed on till he found an old stone seat by a drinking fountain, sheltered by trees from the road. He paused, hid his gold and most of his silver in a zip-up compartment, and quenched his thirst.

He was about to proceed when he noticed the herdsmen ahead starting to drive their beasts to the side of the road. There were loud hoofbeats approaching and he scuttled back himself to the bench. About a dozen people rode past on large ponies. These wore gold or brass ornaments on their cloaks and horse-harness, and the men – a few of the riders were women – had swords in their belts. They clattered down the road and Nathan watched as they rode through the city gates, waving to sentries in the gate-towers. As he got closer he saw these towers were the first fully maintained buildings he had encountered. One was of old stone, but the other had been rebuilt in whitewashed timber.

Not far from the gate was a grim sight. There was a high pole with on top of it a human skull still wearing a rusty iron helmet, decorated with gold coins which no one had dared to loot. In front was a flat stone inscribed with untidy but legible Latin:

ECCE CAPUT HENGISTI DUX BARBARORUM

"See the head of Hengist Leader of the Barbarians." It continued: "He betrayed the tyrant who trusted him and married his daughter." Nathan shuddered. As a Welshman, he had no reason to mourn the death a rebel barbarian; but Hengist had begun as an adventurer with a dream most thought impossible, and surely that was what Nathan was. This was not the Camelot of a prototypical J. F. Kennedy. It had no Geneva Convention, but the open harnessing of fear to the juggernaut of death. As for those he was about to meet, he had no idea how to approach them, nor even what language to use, his beloved Welsh, or Latin.

It was already warm, and the sweat was running down Nathan's back. He decided to take off his anorak while planning his next move. He felt eyes on him, looked with a shudder at the empty sockets of the skull, then realized the sentries in the tower were staring at him. There were more soldiers in the gate, and a couple of horsemen with swords had paused there to speak to them. To delay would invite suspicion. He set out with his pack on his back, his anorak over one arm and the Time Rail with its crystals over the other.

The sentries wore leather armour sewn with iron rings like mail. The most elaborate was worn by the oldest man, who had rings stitched over the area below his ribs, with an extension over his heart shaped like a Celtic circle cross, so the suggestion was a cross on a hill. He started to speak; in Welsh, but fast in an strange accent. Still the voice was music: Nathan realized he might soon hear the original poems from the Book of Taliesyn: or even the lament of Aneirin for the men who went to Catreath. But that should lie in this future; he might be able to stop the doomed band ever needing to ride to Catreath.

One of the horsemen dismounted and said slowly in Latin: "I am Drustanus son of Cunomorus. Who are you? Are you one of the Emperor's men?"

Nathan understood. At the Anglo-Catholic school, he had typically found the then-dead language the easiest subject. "My name is Nathan Lloyd. My ancestors were born in this island, but left during a time of troubles. I have come home to join your campaign against the barbarians."

The circle-cross man said roughly: "What campaign? Haven't we had enough of those? We're at peace now!"

A couple of youths, little more than boys, had reached the gate. One of them pointed at Nathan and his crystal-ended Time Rail, and said something in the coarse Welsh. Nathan was sure he caught the name "Myrddin." Wasn't that the original Merlin? Circle-cross was saying angrily: "He's not Myrddin. At least he denies it. His name's Natanleod."

Meanwhile Drustanus, the man who had jumped off

his horse, was pointing at Nathan's chest and saying angrily: "Why are you wearing the Emperor's name on your tunic, if you were born overseas, and aren't one of his men?"

Nathan realized with a start he was wearing the sweatshirt he had bought at Tintagel. It was grey, like the Artognov stone, and embroidered with the inscription. The soldiers crowded round pointing: he guessed about half could read it with an effort. Drustanus read: "Arthnur, father of a descendant of Col, made this! What, are you claiming the Emperor is a seamstress?" He turned to the circle-cross man and said: "I think you'd better search him!"

The sentries surrounded Nathan and herded him into the gateway, made him take off his backpack and money belt and began searching. They sniffed his tea and coffee suspiciously, while Drustanus looked through the money belt. He easily found the hidden compartment, and being unable to unzip it, ripped it open with a knife. While he rummaged through the coins, Nathan cowered against the wall. It was cold as night and damp with dew. His back, pressed against it and soaked, froze with fear, and he realized acutely that he wasn't a non-shitter, and wished profoundly that he could become one. He knew Roman sanitary facilities had been relatively good, and wondered if any still operated in Isca Dumnonii. If not, he faced a 14-century wait for a civilized toilet. Meanwhile, Drustanus was saying: "I've never seen so many coins! This one's from the East. Perhaps that's where he's from!"

The circle-cross man replied: "I'm more worried about his wand. There is something of enchantment about it." He pointed to the Time Rail with its crystals. In the shadowed gateway the gold flecks were glowing as brightly as they had during the night. He crossed himself and went on: "Maybe he is this Myrddin, this pagan troublemaking enchanter from north of the wall!"

They all crossed themselves and glared at Nathan. Some fingered their daggers. They would already be Catholics: he tried to remember if the Inquisition existed at this time, meanwhile stammering: "The crystals were a present... from a wise man... but they can't harm you."

"So what's this?" Circle-cross was holding the revolver by the barrel.

"Let me show you." Nathan took it by the grip. At once he felt more confident. "It isn't... enchantment. It's a... very powerful weapon... by which the... Easterners project... Greek Fire." Quite a crowd had gathered; sentries, horsemen, herders, children. The soldiers were looking interested at the word "weapon." It was time for Nathan to impress them. He said loudly and clearly in Welsh: "The barbarians will attack you again. This can help. Look!" He stepped into the part of the gateway where the sun was starting to shine in, raised the gun in his right hand, aimed at the sky, and pulled the trigger.

Absolutely nothing happened. Nathan panicked. He was sure he had loaded the thing. It occurred to him to check the safety catch, there wasn't one, but he realized he had to pull the hammer back. Fumbling, he did so with his left hand. The crowd was getting impatient.

More horsemen were approaching the gate, someone said: "No!" as he again raised his right arm and fired at the sky.

The report was deafening in the stone gateway, and the recoil nearly broke Nathan's wrist. He almost let go of the gun, then Drustanus dashed it out of his hand and Circle-cross dragged him back into the gateway. People were shouting, horses neighing and whinnying. Several in the approaching party panicked. One rider, a woman, got her horse under control first and continued forward. A boy in the crowd said: "Was that Myrddin attacking the Saxie-nax Thunder-God?" and a woman beside him cuffed him and crossed herself.

Strong hands held Nathan's arms. Then, into the sunlit part of the gateway, there rode the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had golden hair, a little reddened by the morning sun, and wore a long gown of white samite. Nathan didn't know what samite was, but this had to be it. There, in the dark age of Artognov, he set eyes on a sight from a Pre-Raphaelite painting. All of the people bowed deeply, and Nathan was forced to his knees. Drustanus said: "My Lady, my centurion has captured a strange man." He told what had happened, concluding: "He says he is a Greek called Natanleod, but the people fear he may be the rebel bard Myrddin. And his tunic has a device you must see."

Nathan's sweatshirt was pulled off and presented to the lady. Beneath, he was still wearing the T-shirt Blodwyn had brought him from Greece. Drustanus said: "Be careful, my Lady. Look, he has barbarian runes on his undertunic!"

She said: "Let's have a look at him." Nathan was pulled to his feet and into the light. She was sitting astride her horse, but suddenly vaulted off it in a single fluid movement. She was tall: her grey-green eyes were only just below Nathan's. She had a creamy, faintly tanned complexion; her arms and throat were bare, but covered in gold torques; indeed the only thing which marred her perfect grace was an almost vulgar display of jewellery: few actual gems, but she wore more gold than an entire gang of West Hollywood crack dealers. She said: "I am Nimua, daughter of Elesa, the Hostage of Britain." The crowd tittered as if she had made some joke lost on Nathan. She looked at Nathan closely, then said: "I think these letters are Greek, not the runes of the Saxons, but I cannot read them." Nathan heaved a sigh of relief, especially as the "runes" read "Mykonos Taverna Petros" and he had no idea how to explain that. Suddenly, Nimua spoke to him in an even stranger language than the rest, Germanic and highly inflected. He stared blankly, and she switched to the early Welsh, spoken slowly and clearly: "We have not met, but you wear your interest in me on your chest. Who are you?"

He tried to explain himself, but she interrupted: "He does not know the Saxon tongue, but replies to ours, which no barbarian ever learns. I think he is not an enemy. The dedication on his tunic is to the Emperor, and to me. So, he is mine for the moment. I will take him to Caer Malet and present him to the Emperor at Pente-cost!"

They rode into the city. Nathan was found a donkey, which he thought a poor omen. What it meant to be the prisoner of a hostage who was treated more like a queen he could not guess. However, he was given bread, fried pork, and rough cider, and found a pony to ride for the next stage of the journey. The city was half empty, literally. Whole streets had been demolished and replaced by market gardens, and many remaining buildings were derelict and occupied by the inevitable pigs. However, a market of sorts was in progress and about a quarter of the buildings had been whitewashed and their roofs patched with thatch. There was a fair crowd in the market, and rumour travelled fast, people pointing at Nathan, crossing, and hissing: "Myrddin!"

They left at noon. Nimua's escort was joined by Drustanus on horseback, and followed by a crowd of peasants travelling on foot or by cart or donkey. Nathan rode next to Nimua and Drustanus, flanked by two bodyguards whose leather was totally covered by mail-rings: two more of these were between him and his belongings, which were strapped to a donkey, apart from his sweatshirt, which Drustanus carried like a banner on a crosspiece nailed to a spear.

They passed market gardens, then wilder country with herds of sheep and cattle, then past a crude wooden fortress on a hill, again surrounded by fields. Nothing was farmed away from the forts that couldn't be driven towards them under its own steam in time of emergency. He saw farmers in small, round cottages, then later great classical mansions, white walls blackened by fire, every one of them roofless and open to the sky. They rode by day and slept in hillforts by night. Nathan got used to post-Roman toilets.

Often Nimua would ask him questions, and he would reply as best he could. On the last morning, when they could see the Tor of Glastonbury to the left, and a hillfort she said was Caer Malet to the right, she said:

"You have lived in the greatest of cities."

"I have." He meant Harvard, not Byzantium.

"Tell us how the Greeks make the best barbarians serve them against the rest. That way, we can avoid another war."

"Why? Don't you want to stop the English? Don't you want

revenge?"

She looked at him sourly. "My father and his men killed my grandfather and my uncles. My mother and grandmother were born great ladies, and became concubines. For which should I seek revenge?"

The darkness in these words, in this age, chilled him. He stammered: "Just accept that I don't know who *you* are!" She looked sceptically at the sweatshirt-banner, with its mysterious logo: ARTOGNOV FATHER OF A DESCENDANT OF COL MADE THIS. He said: "The man who gave it to me didn't know what it meant!"

"Very well. I like you. You neither defer nor despise. I will tell you."

She paused though, and he said: "Why should anyone despise you?"

"For being illegitimate."

Drustanus added: "If she was legitimate, and a son,



they would love her. And many hate her for not being those things they wish she was."

She said: "Read your tunic. I am the descendant of Colius... Col. He was one of the Roman council who ruled Britain after the legions left. Col was happy to be listened to by the council. He did not ask to be King or Emperor. But he was pushed aside by one who did, Vortigern. You know of that tyrant?"

"Yes. He betrayed us, married the daughter of the Jute Hengist."

She muttered: "You know so much a Greek would not trouble with, and so little! Listen! The Saxon king Aella invaded Britain in those days. Vortigern asked Aella for a truce, and offered him Col's daughter as a hostage. Her name was Colia. Aella had heard of the once-great Col, and at first he accepted. But when the Saxon learned Col was out of power, he declared war, and made Colia his concubine. So, my mother Elesa was born, and raised as... as... among barbarians. You... you understand what I mean?"

She was looking at Nathan very intently, her eyes wet but wide, as though she was too proud to admit the hurt her illegitimacy caused her, and was determined the wind should dissolve her tears. Nathan wasn't certain he understood, but he was less interested in her mother, than the astonishing fact that if the woman who rode beside him was the descendant of Col, she must therefore be the daughter of Artognov, in other words of Arthur himself. Though he was supposed to be a scientist, he was suddenly certain that God, or fate, had reached across time and shown him how to break its rules, delivering him to the side of the woman mentioned on the stone. The daughter of the man who had saved half Britain for the Welsh: who could be shown how to save the rest of it. He said: "It upsets you that your mother was a captive among barbarians. But your father saved the Welsh..."

"She wasn't a captive! And don't use Saxon swearwords to me!"

He had forgotten what "Welsh" meant in Saxon, but remembered it wasn't a true Cymric word. He said humbly. "I am sorry. In... the City with the University... they know less than they think."

"Still. you are willing to learn. Listen! The Romans regained the advantage, defeated the Jutes and Saxons, and my mother Elesa in turn became a hostage. Then her Roman blood ran true, and she loved her captor, and bore his children. Yes, he was Arthnur the War Leader, now called Emperor of Britain. He honoured her but he could not marry her. Too many people said she was illegitimate and half-savage!

"In shame and anger, my mother ran away, and took her son, but I was too small to take. Then the Saxons rebelled again and my father the Emperor defeated them at the siege on Mons Badonicus. Even so, she would not return because she said he had killed her father and brothers. So, he made her queen of the Saxons in the south, but he separated the Saxons on the frontier, and made my brother Cerdic the underking of the West Saxons. So, they have no king but his mistress and his son."

Nathan didn't know what to think. She was kind, sad, and lovely, but half English, conceived in betrayal. He felt pity for her, but feared she was no more an ally than Blodwyn. "For your brother, you sympathize with the barbarians?"

"You think I look like a barbarian?"

She wore a dagger at her belt, but apart from that and her gaudy jewellery, she did not look at all like a barbarian, so it was easy to say: "Of course not!"

They came to the hillfort Camelot. Nathan could see it was much grander than the rest, with a stone wall and towers on the gates. Before those gates were twin grim trophies: poles on each side of the path with skulls. Nimua said, pointing: "Vortigern the tyrant! Rhenwhein his Jutish bride!"

Death and defeat had reduced the king and his harlot to two white skulls, identical except that one had a family of blue tits nesting in its eye socket. A Latin phrase came into Nathan's mind, and he said it aloud: "Sic transit gloria mundi!" – and he was so oppressed by all the horrors he had seen or been told of that a tear rolled down his face as he looked at the skulls.

They hurried him into the fortress. It was crowded with soldiers and ladies, and dominated by a big thatched hall, surrounded by a colonnade of wooden pillars carved and whitewashed to look like classical columns. Peasants were driving in donkeys laden with food and water-jars, and there was a smell of meat boiling. Nathan was given a few minutes to use a crude latrine and a slightly more sophisticated bath, then Drustanus took him to the thatched Acropolis.

Arthnur sat on a dais of the dining-hall. It was obvious who he was. His hair was greying, but had some of Nimua's fairness left. He wore a white cape with a thick mauve border, slung round his shoulders like a frat-party toga. There was an actual Round Table, and round it sat men in capes with narrow mauve borders, plus some who looked like priests, and a few women. Nimua sat next to Arthnur. Drustanus said: "My Lord, I bring you Natanleod, a traveller who brings us a mighty Greek weapon as a gift! It is so powerful the common people think him Myrddin, the pagan Enchanter of the North!"

Arthnur said calmly: "Myrddin is a good bard, but he never comes south of the Wall. Most of the powers rumours give him are fables."

Drustanus went on: "Natanleod claims our kinship, and speaks our tongue, but with a strange accent."

"Are you accusing him of being a Saxenach?"

"Only half!" Nathan started to protest angrily, but Drustanus shouted: "He wept at the skulls of Vortigern and Rhenwhein! I think he is their son, sent for safety to the Greeks!"

Son of a traitor and a barbarian queen! Nathan was struck dumb. How could anyone think such a thing? Unless it was Nimua, herself the child of such a miscegenation. As if on cue, she started to speak: "I think he can be trusted. He hates the barbarians, if anything, too much."

Arthnur said decisively: "Bad men do not always have

bad sons. Vortigern's other sons were not traitors. Let him be made welcome!"

Nathan was made very welcome, given food, cider, even wine, a great luxury here, then a curtained cubicle to sleep in with his first soft bed, so he was not pleased to be woken in the middle of the night. Nimua stood above him with a number of other young women, all in riding habits. She offered to let him borrow one. He said blearily: "It's dark! Where are we going?"

"It is Pentecost. We go to Glastonbury."

She led the way to the gate, where her guards waited with horses. It was dark as they rode out, but there was turquoise in the east as they reached the plain, and pink light spread across the sky as they rode towards the beacon of the Tor at a great pace, almost a gallop. At first Nathan was afraid, but Nimua rode beside him and smiled, so he said: "Are we going to pray?"

"At sunrise on Pentecost and other feastdays, all we children of sin at Camelot swim naked in the lake at Glastonbury."

"Why on Earth do you do that?"

"Why, to tempt the monks, of course! What use are monks if they can't withstand temptation?"

"What if they give in?"

"They have to become soldiers. In wartime, all the women swim. In peacetime, only us bastards!"

It was getting lighter. They rode into a swamp where small pools alternated with wooded islands. He could see no path, but she guided him unerringly. Then he heard the chanting of psalms, and supposed they must be near the monastery. As the sky got brighter, the chanting grew louder. They rode through trees to the side of a small, clear lake. There was a little headland, and Nimua dismounted and strode onto it. The chanting was very loud, echoing on the water. Nathan followed, and saw that the monks were standing up to their necks in the dawn-cold lake. Nimua stood on the headland, raising her arms to shrug off her habit and ensure they could see her. She waited as all but one of the monks waded to the far bank, climbed out, and stood with their backs to her as she slipped out of her dress, signalling to the others do the same. The guards sat impassively on their horses as if they saw their mistress naked every day. Nathan had no hesitation removing his clothes. This had no comparison to the drunken scene on the beach at Tintagel. One monk remained, his eyes on the heavens, chanting loudly in Latin, the 23rd Psalm. As he reached the words "Though I walk through the valley in the shadow of Death/ I will fear no evil" the morning sun broke through the trees and covered the water with red light: Nimua dived in gracefully and all the others followed.

It was the coldest water Nathan had ever encountered, cold as the space between times, and he had the strangest companions. Most of the girls stayed in a for a minute or two, then dived below the surface and immediately after climbed out clutching some weedy trophy from the lakebed. Nathan took this as his cue to get out also, but Nimua took her duty more seriously, swimming up and down and then in a tight circle round the chant-

ing monk, splashing him. He resisted, however, repeating the psalm, and when he reached the words "for thou art with me" she swam to the middle of the lake and dived. The sight of her bottom and legs disappearing graceful as a dolphin into the water made Nathan feel very glad he had not come back in time to become a monk. Drying himself among the other girls, he had to wrap his borrowed habit tightly round him to conceal the extent of his unsuitability for that vocation.

Nimua stayed under the water for a long time, much longer than any of the others. Nathan realized that though she wore no swimsuit, she had not bothered to remove her heavy gold ornaments. He started to panic lest these had weighed her down. He ran to the bank to jump in and rescue her when something broke the surface, making ripples like a loch monster in the gleaming morning water. It was long as Nimua's arm but green not gold: then her actual arm and her head followed, and she swung in the air what he realized was a sword covered in weeds apart from a gold crosspiece.

She paddled to the bank like a three-legged dog, one hand holding the sword sloped over her back like the fin of an orca. Nathan helped her out. For a moment her body, still warm under the freezing drops of water, was pressed against his: and it took her another moment to disengage it. She exclaimed: "Very resistive! That's Brother Gildas, one of our most holy monks. To resist making love to an Emperor's daughter on a fine morning indicates a very holy monk! Mind you, he'll have been in there all night."

She examined her trophy. "Look how Our Lady has rewarded our unsuccessful temptation with this lovely old sword!" She explained: "In the old days, the stupid pagans were tempted by their wicked gods to throw their best possessions into the water. But now the Lake is sacred to Our Lady, she allows us to recover them!"

As soon as she was dressed, Nimua led him further into the wood, till they came to a garden on the side of a small hill, where a stream of very clear water bubbled. She signalled her bodyguards to wait at the bottom, then led the way up the garden to the source of the stream, an old stone well. She said:

"This Fountain was built by Joseph of Arimathea, when he brought the Faith to our land. In its foundation, he buried the chalice of the Last Supper, so this is the most holy water you can find. It will cure the sick, and if the sound in body drink from it, it will deliver them from the next great danger they face. Provided they are also pure in spirit." She grasped his hand and placed it in the water, on the old stone of the well. "Swear to me you do not come here to make war on Emperor Arthnur or any of his people, British or Roman, and you will never do so. I do not at this moment include my brother Cerdic in that oath."

It was easy to say: "I so swear!" for it was true.

She put down the sword she had recovered from the lake and gave him a drink of the cold holy water from a little brass cup. It crossed his mind that if he had refused the oath, she might have killed him there, thousands of miles and years from anyone who might have cared or

objected. Then he looked at her joyful face and realized this was the only person in two ages who really cared if he lived or died. As he savoured the incredibly pure taste of the Chalice water, she grabbed his hand again and forced it back into the stream. "If you will also swear to make no war on Cerdic my brother and his people, or my mother and hers, then I will marry you, and bear you a son with the blood of Arthnur and Vortigern in his veins!"

"What!" he gasped. "Do you love me then?"

"Enough. This isn't about love. The people in the far west and the north feared the Romans as much as the Jutes and Saxons, and to them Vortigern was no tyrant. An Emperor with his blood as well as Arthnur's, and yes, the shameful blood also of Aella and Hengist, will unite all the people of Britain! It is merely convenient that I love you enough."

He pulled his hand out of the water, and said: "I really can't truly swear this, for I am no more Vortigern's son than I am Myrddin the enchanter."

"But the people think you are. They know you know the ways of the Greeks and the old Romans who united Britain before. Give me the child who will be Emperor of Britain!"

Her voice had so much passion that he said: "Not yet, but perhaps. I'm not ready to... give up my mission. But I do love you. Any man would marry you!"

"No," she said bitterly. "Only the brave. Only those who do not fear the jealousy of my cousins!"

As they returned, the path filled with people. All got out of the way, except two who rode in a carriage: Gildas, in a dry habit, and his abbot. Nimua rode alongside to give what sounded like heartfelt congratulations on his resistance. He in turn thanked her for being such a totally corrupt and despicable daughter of Eve as to be easy to resist. As they rode ahead, Nathan said: "He said those dreadful things, yet I got the impression he quite likes you."

"Oh, he does. You see, he fears he might be fated to give in, and if so, he'd think it would be better to marry me than to burn in Hell. So, the temptation is greater but less frightening if we are friendly."

Nathan felt a shudder of jealousy. "He seems unlikely to give in now."

"No. But he fears he might be fated to do so, predestined."

"So he's amazingly strong-willed and totally predestined?"

"He says so. He's read a book by a Bishop Augustine which explains it. He's promised to make a copy of it for me."

He was in an age where science and reason were as unknown as Budweiser and flush toilets. Superstitions warred, and the only argument admitted was in the books of dead bishops. The people felt they had no say in their fate! But he was there, and his unprecedented presence told him they did.

Below the fortress, Arthnur had paraded his men. There must have been a thousand horsemen in mail and leather, as many on foot. He himself wore a rather bat-

tered suit of Roman armour, and a cloak all purple. He looked as near a real Emperor as one could wish, as he reviewed his ranks of troops. Around the parade, however, was a much larger crowd, ordinary peasants mostly, but lots of men in threadbare tunics, carrying rough weapons. Some of these were chanting "Myrddin," "Give us back our homes" and "Drive the barbarians out!" When Nathan appeared, riding beside Nimua, a whisper ran through the crowd, followed by a hiss that became a cry: "Myrddin!" "Save our children!"

People started to crowd around Nathan, pushing sick children towards him as if he could heal them. He felt terrified. He had never even learned first aid. As Nimua's guards made a path for them, she explained that these people were landless refugees from the East, seeking asylum and plotting revenge. And the only disease Nathan could see in the children that was curable was hunger.

The abbot led a Pentecost service from a rough wooden platform, then called Gildas to preach the sermon. He abused everyone in Britain, the pagan Saxons of course, but also the idle sinful British: "Why do you dogs return to your sins like drunkards to vomit! Why is it only the backsliding heathen sinner Myrddin who preaches war against the spawn of Satan's whores! Have you offended God so much you are predestined to perish through sloth?"

The crowd got so excited that Arthnur rode to the platform. Even some of his own men were looking doubtful. He shouted: "It's too soon! We lost too many in the last war! Let it be the barbarians who fight each other! Soon Cerdic and his Saxons will attack the Jutes on the Isle of Vectis..."

Gildas ranted: "We've had enough of your bastard sons!"

"My daughter Nimua has brought you Natanleod, son of Vortigern to..."

"And the lovers of your bastard daughters!"

Nathan was propelled towards the platform. Drustanus pressed his pistol into his hand and said: "Use this wisely!"

Nathan knew his moment. He was the cusp. All were shouting: Arthnur, Nimua, Drustanus and their men for peace, almost all the rest for war. No single voice could be heard. He raised the pistol and fired it two-handed into the air. The thunderous report brought a sudden hush to the crowd. Drustanus broke it, shouting "Wisely!" – but if Nathan had wanted to act wisely he would still have been working for a PhD in Exeter. He shouted: "There is no predestination! Your fate is in your own hands, and mine! I bring you True Greek Fire to douse the false thunder of Thor! Down with all the English! Death to all barbarians!"

The mob roared "Myrddin!" "Natanleod!" and "Vortigern!" The Emperor and his men started to withdraw into the fortress. The rest lifted the speaking platform bodily into the air, and carried their hero Nathan on it around his new army. It pitched unsteadily, and for a moment he felt seasick. Then it passed. He would alter fate. He would change history.

On the last night, they camped on a hill from which Nathan could see the Saxon lands to the east of Southampton Water, and the Jutish Isle of Wight to the south. His men had found him a tent, a sword, and a coat of leather and mail. This made him feel guilty, for hardly any of them had real weapons or armour. Some had already dropped off, mostly farmers with land to tend. Those who remained were the men and a few brave women with nothing in the world but their rags and their wooden clubs and spears, the children of refugees who had fled the last invasion preferring hunger to slavery or worse. He went into his little tent and wondered if he should pray, if any god would listen. Someone said, "Visitor for you." It was Nimua. She stared at him and said:

"It's not too late to abandon this madness. Return to *Caer Malet*. Give me a child who will be Emperor of Britain!"

"It's not madness. I have 5,000 men!"

"You had when you left *Caer Malet*. Half have melted away. Even *Gildas* is at his prayers. None of you are warriors, and you don't have the supplies to feed the ones who don't flee at the first sign of the Saxon berserkers."

Nathan shuddered. He hadn't counted on enemies who knew no fear; but he must become like them. He glared at her: "Are you their spy?"

"Never! I swear by the *Chalice*!" She looked so hurt he suddenly said:

"Then I'll tell you the truth. I'm not from *Byzantium*. I'm not *Myrddin*, but I do have enchantment in my staff. I came here from the future." She stared impassively as if she had heard greater wonders. "A future where the land swarms with English, and our nation's memory is mocked as legend! But that wouldn't matter to you, half-caste!"

"So, you are a prophet. I will never call you a liar, Nathan, but if you truly came to this age from another through the *Otherworld*, if you know of this day only by legends, be guided by me and by the Emperor!" He shook his head, and she said sadly: "You will fail! But if you succeed even a little, I will be waiting. Only the brave..."

He watched her ride towards the setting sun.

Next day they marched across the stolen lands. There were farm huts, but the crops were green, and it was difficult to discourage the men from peeling off to chase animals, or plunder village ale houses. The whole formation got very ragged, and Nathan decided he had to find *Cerdic's* main warband and destroy it as soon as possible. They advanced all day, then towards sundown they crossed a low ridge, and suddenly there it was, on a ridge less than a mile in front: a host at least as big as his own, and far better armed. He saw the glint of metal all along the line; not all were armoured, but every man had a shield and a spear or an axe.

A thunder of drumming started, and a wave of fear ran along his own line. It was clear few of his men were non-shitters. In the middle of the enemy line was a single horseman under a crude banner of a hammer and a lightning bolt. This must be *Cerdic*, brother of *Nimua* but forefather of the bastard English kings. Nathan realized

the thunder-worshippers might not hear his gun above the drums. It would be a conventional battle then... at a change in the beat of the drums, the barbarians started forward behind a solid wall of shields. His men were starting to edge right back off the ridge, surely the last tactics... some of them were starting to run! He yelled, no one heard, he noticed the gold flecks glowing in the crystals of his wand. He held it up like a banner, the line steadied, and he yelled "Charge!" and ran towards the enemy. A few followed. Others were still edging back. The dreadful words echoed in his mind: "And the Welsh fled from the English as one flees from fire!"

It was a repetitive drumbeat: "TAN TATA-RAN TAN: TAN TATA-RAN TAN: TAN TATA-RAN!" – then a pause, then the same again. It was like the *Ride of the Valkyries*, and he found himself glancing for danger at the sky. The men who had charged with him were looking very shaky. *Arthnur* and his thousand horsemen might have made a difference, but *Arthnur* knew better. Even the men who went to *Catreath*, who would now ride, would be men trained to sell their lives dearer than this.

Nathan staggered to a halt, and pulled out his pistol, the one advantage his time-travelling gave him. The enemy were almost in range. He could at least kill *Cerdic*: let the English find another ancestor for their kings! He realized the beat was slower than the *Ride of the Valkyries*: "TAN TATA-RAN TAN: TAN TATA-RAN TAN: TAN TATA-RAN" – then quite a long gap before the next repetition. He waited for the next moment of silence, pulled back the hammer, took two-handed aim at the hated barbarian ancestor. The single horseman had to be *Cerdic*. He had fair hair and had not put on his helmet. He looked just like *Nimua* at maximum gunshot range. Perhaps it was that which made Nathan's hand shake as he pulled the trigger. The bullet flew high, but smashed into the hammer-flash banner, almost knocking it from the standard-bearer's hand. The line abruptly stopped at the crash of the gunshot. This time Nathan took aim at the standard-bearer. He would show them who had the power of thunder!

Then he noticed the berserkers. There were five of them, naked but for tattoos, loping ahead of the enemy swinging their axes two-handed. One for each bullet, then. He stopped, took aim at the nearest berserker, fired two-handed: and missed. The recoil knocked him back, but he steadied, pulled back the hammer, fired again. This time he hit the man somewhere, there was a spurt of blood and the warrior fell over in an involuntary back somersault. But by now the next berserker was almost on him, swinging an axe above his head. Nathan tried to fire but the hammer jammed.

He dropped the pistol, swinging his *Time Rail* up to block the axe with the shaft. They met with a terrific clang: the shaft broke, but it took the force out of the axeblow. The crystals flew apart, almost tugging the bits of the shaft out of his hands. The berserker was raising his axe for the final blow. Nathan felt acid fear in stomach and mouth: then suddenly it was replaced by a cool, pleasant sensation, like the water from the *Chalice Well*.

There was a moment of cold darkness. He tumbled over on his back. There was a strong feeling of things not quite as they should be: then it passed. He was lying on grass, but there was no sign of the berserker, or any of the other warriors. It was twilight... no, dawn. The Time crystals had buried themselves so deeply in the ground only the broken tips of the shaft were visible.

He had no idea where he was. One thing was sure: he was out of the desperate battle with the Saxons. He got up and looked around. He was in a field. He could see a hoarding at the edge. He walked over, and found it read:

MERLIN'S FIELD: an estate of luxury four-bedroomed executive houses for Netly Development Corporation. Work commences November 1st.

He had no money later than Byzantine, so he hitched to Exeter. It was late afternoon when he arrived. He found Blodwyn Evans sitting on the steps outside his flat. She wore shorts, and a black "Artognov" T-shirt with the sleeves recently cut off. She wasn't Nimua, but she looked pretty good in the late afternoon sun.

She jumped up and said: "Nathan-Dai! Where have you been! What have you been up to! Your landlady said you'd been out all night, and that you'd left a note putting me in charge of your rat if you didn't come back!"

"Oh. That was just, me trying something I wasn't very good at."

"I had this dreadful idea you actually made that Time

Machine work!"

"Whatever gave you that idea? It'll never do what I hoped for."

"Look! I've been reading *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* all day. There's a passage here that wasn't there before. They never gave the names of Welsh leaders! I've read the Cerdic bits lots of times, and it doesn't belong!"

"What's it say?"

"Look. 'AD 507: Cerdic and Cynric fought against the Welsh, and they killed 5,000 men, and with them their King, Natanleod.' Odd name! 'And for him the place is called Netly to this day!' It doesn't belong!"

He shrugged. "You know these old chronicles are just legends and exaggerations. It wasn't like that. Not 5,000 in the end. I only changed history by a name!" He had scrawled the graffiti of his name on the *Chronicle*. A thought struck him. "If you want to know about the machine, there'll be a mess of pristine Dark Age soil in my office, complete with halves of worms! Any idea what to do with it?"

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Peter T. Garratt has been a regular contributor to *Interzone* in the past, his previous stories including "The Collectivization of Transylvania" (issue 81), "The Hooded Man" (issue 104), "The Inauguration" (issue 115) and "Under the Stars of Mars" (issue 119). He lives in Brighton, and often represents this magazine at UK sf conventions.

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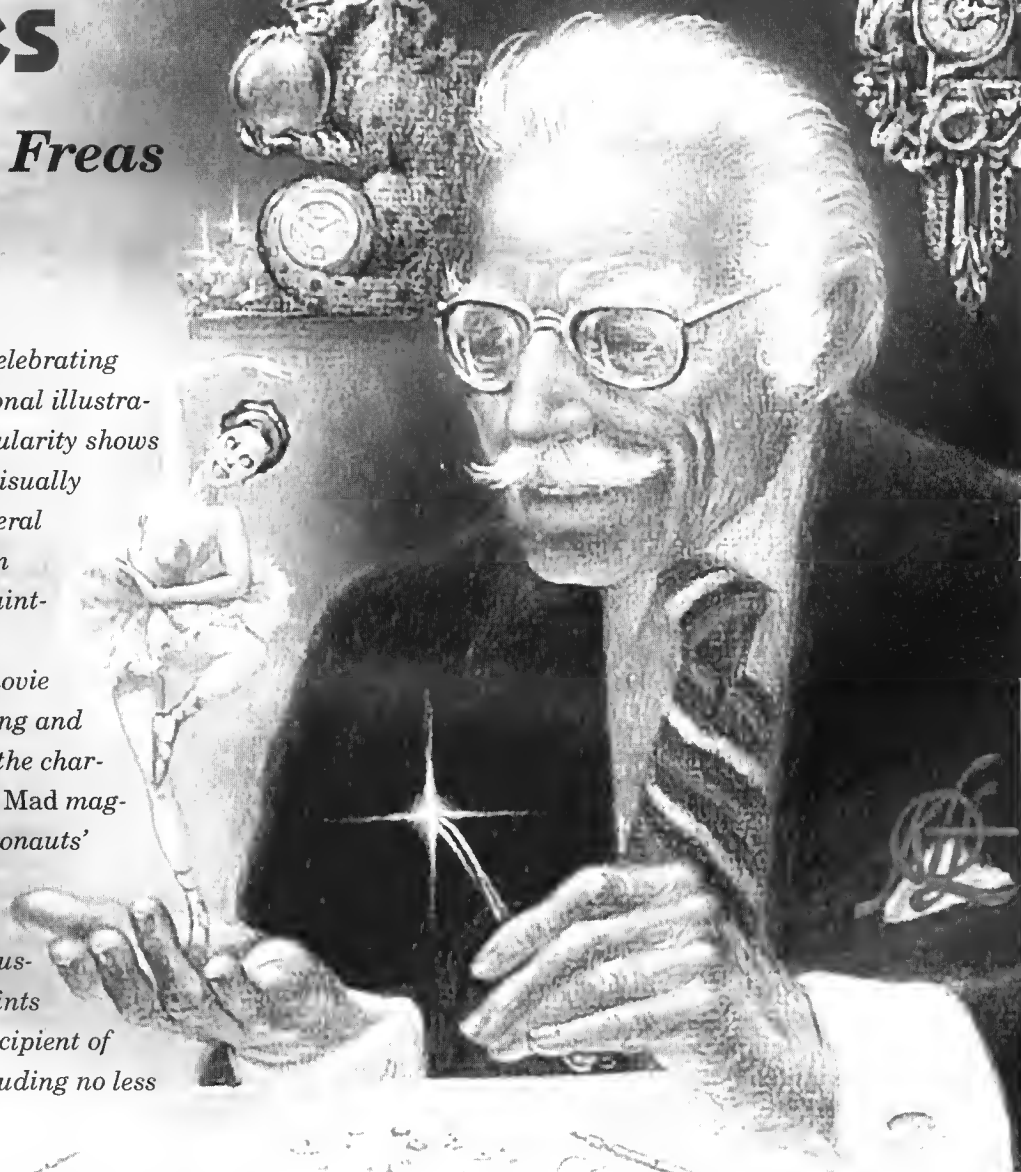
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Freas Frames

Frank Kelly Freas
interviewed by
Stan Nicholls

Now in his 78th year, and celebrating half a century as a professional illustrator, Frank Kelly Freas's popularity shows no sign of waning. He has visually interpreted the works of several generations of science-fiction and fantasy authors. His paintings have graced countless books, magazines, games, movie posters, album covers, trading and greeting cards. He realized the character Alfred E. Neuman for Mad magazine and designed the astronauts' shoulder patch for NASA's Skylab 1 mission. In the 1970s, he was the first sf illustrator to make available prints of his cover art. He is the recipient of many major accolades, including no less than ten Hugo Awards.



Freas got his break in 1950, when he was still at art school. "It happened rather oddly in a way," he recalls. "I was studying illustration when a friend of mine came back from New York just having sold his first piece of professional illustration to *Weird Tales* magazine, then edited by Dorothy McIlwraith. He took one look at the picture I was working on and said, 'You've got to send this to Miss McIlwraith.' I said, 'But it's not finished.' Well, the instructor and all my friends got on my back immediately – 'Send it in! Send it in!' Okay, unfinished, I sent it in, and behold, Miss McIlwraith loved it. This picture was of a little dancing satyr, and it was unfinished in the sense that he was playing a pan pipe, and what I really wanted to do was put a clarinet in his hand. The only suggestion she made was that I paint a halo around the satyr, with the purpose of making it easier to reproduce in her limited three-colour process. Anyway, it came out in November of 1950, and it was astonishing it had the impact that it did. *Weird Tales* was undergoing one of its periodic moves to the top of the list at that time. It was a magazine that everybody who read fantasy or science fiction would turn to when it was available. It was always in and out of the marketplace, and it always worked at the very edge of its budget. I don't think it made any money in the last 30 years of its existence, but it still managed to struggle on and keep its reputation."

Forty years later, Freas finally had the opportunity to render the picture as originally envisaged, complete with clarinet, as the cover of the November 1990 issue of the revived *Weird Tales*.

With that very first published illustration he established a distinctive style that contained what might be termed a pleasing impish humour. "That's one of the things I don't get much chance to do any more," Freas says, a little regretfully. "I'm inclined to see humour where nobody else might find it. Least of all the authors. Once in a while I still go overboard and illustrate something with a touch of humour that doesn't really detract from the story but lends a lightness to it that's sometimes quite desirable."

The commission opened doors for him. "It was the only published sample I had when I made my first trip to New York to try to sell illustrations," he explains. "But, being the legendary *Weird Tales*, I couldn't have had a better sample. On that first trip I sold some black-and-white illustrations at ten dollars apiece. But on my second trip I picked up a couple of book jackets, for Gnome Press. I also picked up an illustration for *Planet Stories*, which was another magazine I was

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Least of all
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hoping to break into. Once I had those under my belt, the next step was to move to *Astounding SF*, the top-ranking science-fiction magazine of the period. But, honestly, I was scared to do it. All of my friends, my wife, everybody, was on my back – 'Go see John Campbell... Go see John Campbell.' So I finally broke down and did it, and that was the beginning of 25 years of a perfectly beautiful friendship with *Astounding* editor John W. Campbell. I had meetings with him that used to send me away with my head spinning. I loved every minute of it. He became the official guardian of my children and I became the official guardian of his. Standing, my head came just about to his belt buckle. He was a giant, not only in his stature but in his accomplishments. It was just an astonishing friendship that I was so delighted with, and I always think that the best work I ever did was for John Campbell. When he died, a big glow went out of science fiction for me. I stayed with *Astounding*, and later *Analog*, of course, but nobody could give me the input and the constant inspiration that Campbell did."

Had Freas been a reader of sf before he began illustrating it? "I'd been a big sf reader since I was about eight years old. The minute I started to travel, as I did back and forth from Canada to New York state, where my father lived, I would have a dollar to spend on the train; for lunches, that sort of thing. I always spent 20 cents of it on a copy of *Astounding*, and whatever other sf magazines I could afford. So I was

really an old-time reader. I liked science fiction and fantasy better than anything I could read. I took off from where King Arthur and Robin Hood and the other historical fantasies had left me. This was really *it*. I enjoyed that field more than anything anybody could offer me." Does he still feel that way about the genre? "Oh, yes. It's still my favourite medium of expression, and my favourite medium of reading. Although I'll admit it's harder to find good sf to read now than it was then. There's a lot of it, but you have to depend on other readers, and reviewers, to weed out the junk from the really good stuff. When I started reading it was all cut from the same bolt of cloth. The illustrators were the same sort of illustrators as I became: they illustrated out of their hearts. They loved the medium and they did a marvellous job of *illustration*. Who did I admire in the field? For me, Ed Cartier was absolutely tops. Nobody could have outdone him in the precision of his line, the spontaneity of his brushwork and the brilliance of his analysis of the stories he read. He was a little tin god as far as I was concerned, and I don't think there was anybody else, in or out of the field, who quite matched his stature."

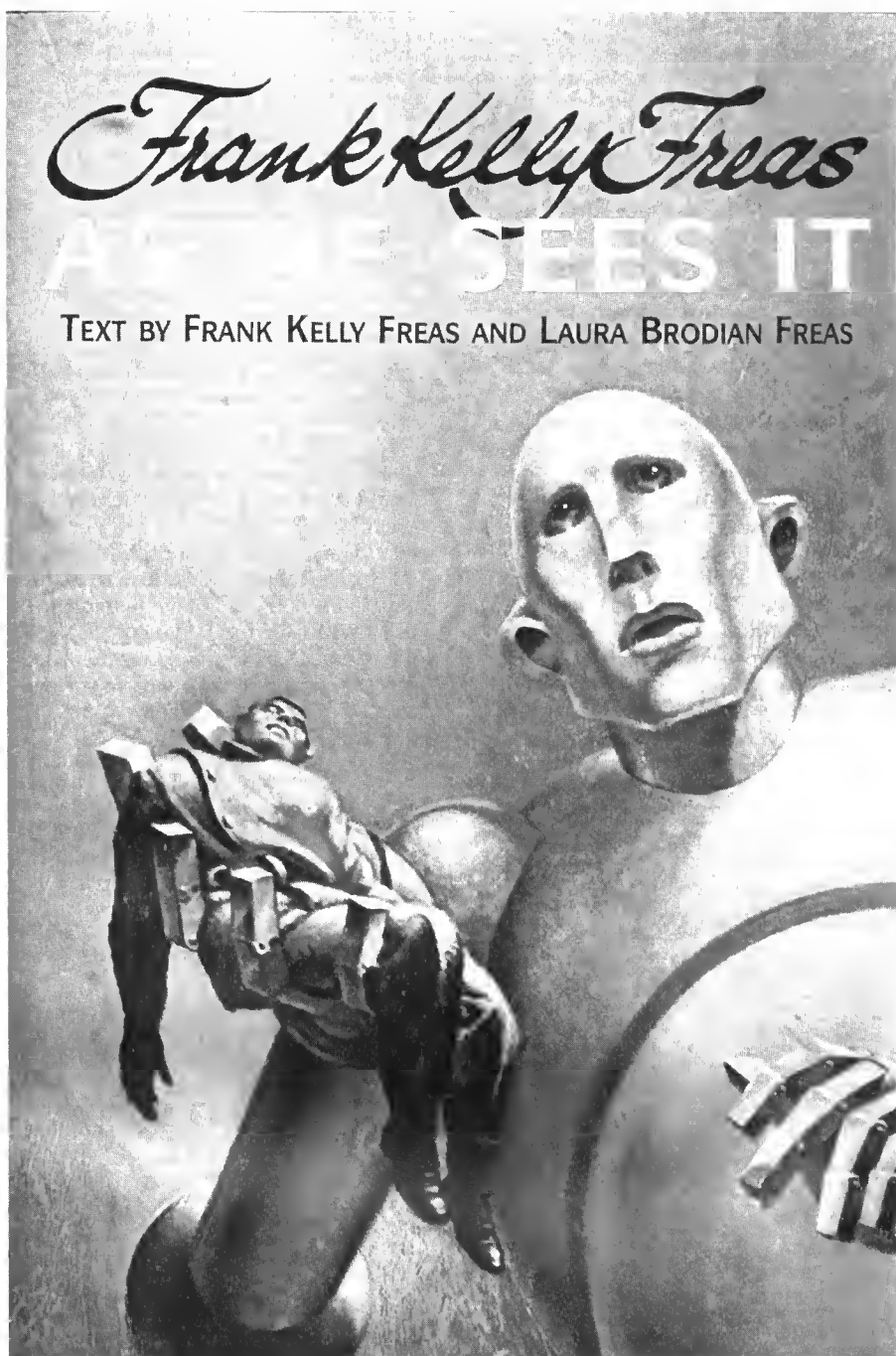
The question arises of whether the artist's function is to illustrate or interpret. Does he seek to put over the actuality of a specific scene or the spirit of the overall work? "I've always seen my function as illustrating *and* interpreting the story. But it's most important to me to get the spirit of the work; basically to express the concept for the reader in visual terms that the author would not have been able to express. Simple things, like the description of a landscape, which the artist could impart in an instant. I mean, it goes by the reader in a 25th of a second but it's registered completely. This would take pages for the author to put across. So I sort of fill in the cracks. In every case I work to get the whole feeling of the story, and most of the time I've succeeded. I get many a nice letter from authors pleased with the way I've done it. I don't recall getting any actual complaints, which is probably a bit unusual."

Does he ever consult the author while in the process of illustrating their work? "No. They've already said what they're going to say. The only time when that may be appropriate is when there's a particular technology they've invented that I'd like more information about. In a sense, it can be more a case of inquiring of the sources the author inquired of, rather than haul the author in on it. Because that sort of question will often worry an author. It's up to me to read between the lines and get it out. I'd

love to tell you the story about Hal Clement and the fish. What it amounts to is that he hadn't described an invented fish that was half biological and half mechanical that played a part in a particular story. So I created it out of whole cloth and at the very last minute painted it in, in the middle of the picture. I consequently got a letter from Hal thanking me for such a beautiful visualization of his fish. He said it was just exactly as he imagined it! Poul Anderson does this all the time. He creates the most *beautiful* images in your mind, but when you start reading back in the story there's very little actual description there. You're the one that's doing it. As a matter of fact, I once *did* speak to Poul about one of his characters when I was illustrating a story of his. I asked him, 'What kind of nose does this guy have?' And he said, 'Does he have a nose?'"

If depicting future technology, like Architecture or a spacecraft, does he think it necessary to have an understanding of real, present technology in order to extrapolate on it? "It isn't necessary to understand anything about present technology or architecture to illustrate futuristic machinery or buildings. But it does help to have an understanding in your own mind of what makes a particular machine go, and how to adapt machinery to do what you want it to do. The same thing with architecture. That's a big help, but it's not a requirement. It makes your stuff more believable and recognizable to the audience. The other thing is that it helps to know the physiology of things. How a liquid will behave and what crystalline structure it will produce when it blast-freezes under a certain gravity in a certain temperature, for instance. These are things that'll keep you on the telephone with an expert for two hours. I know, I've done it."

Does he ever sacrifice scientific accuracy for aesthetic quality? "You will always sacrifice scientific accuracy for aesthetic quality. You will *not* sacrifice the story. You illustrate the story first; aesthetic quality comes afterwards. To me that seems absolutely essential. That's one of the appeals of sf and fantasy: it gives you a great deal more freedom than you have in other mediums. It gives you more freedom than you have in something like, say, westerns. I've done a couple of westerns, and believe me, they don't pay enough money to make it worth my while doing, because I don't know that much about the equipment of a cowboy at any given period of time. No thank you, I'll leave that to the experts. As to sf illustration, if you don't base some of the elements on things the readers already know, then what you come up with is



All the illustrations for this interview are taken from Frank Kelly Freas' recent full-colour book, the cover of which, above, features his illustration **The Gulf Between**, his first cover for *Astounding*. Previous page title picture: **Time Keeper**. "With appropriate changes – more hair, a more noble jaw, a more generous nose and a moustache I wished I had – the model was me."

too far-fetched for them to understand or believe in. It doesn't communicate as well. This is one thing that I think is probably more important to an sf illustrator than anybody else who is illustrating, and I include all of the historical painters. It's an area in which you can fudge to your heart's content, *but* you damn well better know what you're fudging. In this field, there's always somebody out there who knows more about it than you do. You don't want to get nasty letters, but most of all you want to do justice to the job. Even in the realm of fantasy this applies. What makes fantasy work is that it has

its own internal consistency, its own structure. So when you're painting fantasy beasts, for example, they have to be believable in terms of real physiology. Or even in terms of physics. That's to say, if it's a flying creature, where do you place the wings relative to the muscular structure of the creature and its centre of gravity, so that indeed it will be able to fly? You really have to know the anatomy of present-day Earth animals in order to figure this out and make it plausible, even though the creature is totally fantasy."

But the most useful thing is less the knowledge of present-day technology

or architecture, he contends, than an understanding of textures. "For instance, on a nice new spaceship, ready to take off, a polished finish on that thing would be completely beyond our present technology, because it would cost too bloody much. Whereas a ship travelling in space would be bound to acquire a pretty high polish of its own, because of all the micro-meteorites, dust clouds and so on that it would be moving through. It would pick up a polish. And it will be landing in corrosive atmospheres, so I paint in some scumbles of rust. Actually it's not rust, it's oxidation. The point is that texture's a very important part of your painting."

What would happen if he got a manuscript to illustrate and hated it? "Oh God! Gee, *that's* never happened! [This is heavily ironic.] The answer is you do your job. Unless it's material you absolutely would not want to have your name associated with; something really vile, something very objectionable or in bad taste. I think this has happened once. We were really polite and said, 'The time frame you gave us wasn't really sufficient. Maybe there's

somebody else who could do the job for you.' We went out of our way not to make it sound like a direct criticism."

Not that turning down commissions is something he relishes. Making money from professional illustrating is hard enough at the best of times. "Well, basically the bottom line is that this field does not pay well enough for one to make a living out of it. I'm one of the few that has lasted this long with art as a primary source of income. I've more or less made my way as a full-time artist and haven't had to get a job in a factory somewhere to supplement my income. I'm one of the very few, having been that successful as a freelancer. When I was doing the most science fiction, in the early days, I still did a lot of outside stuff that actually paid the bills and subsidized the sf work, and to be honest that's still true to some extent. I don't paint for fun. I haven't done that for years; I've been working to order on *everything*. It's difficult to try getting something out that's not directly applicable to a story."

"Re-paints" are one of the mainstays of his outside work. This is when a client commissions him to paint again one of his classic illustrations, the original of which Freas has retained, or is perhaps in the hands of a collector. They aren't always exact copies; sometimes he changes details he was never happy with, or sees ways of improving the picture. "When I get a request for a re-paint I'll get maybe ten to 15 times the price that the original went to the publisher for. That's only as it should be. And, of course, the original paintings themselves sell for much more than the re-paints, so it's a way for someone to have a kind of second-generation original at an affordable price." The economics of professional illustration make these copies a vital source of cash-flow. "In truth, the prices that we're getting now, if you go in real dollars, are much less than they paid in 1950. In terms of the cost of living, in terms of time and what I pay for materials, it's much, much less. The Graphic Artists Guild is mounting a tremendous campaign to educate the publishers and get them to understand it's the cover art that sells their product, and that they should value it more and pay for good-quality artwork. The artist is truly at the bottom of the totem pole in the publishing process. There was a time, back when I was illustrating for *Astounding*, when I realized that the printer was being paid more than the artists who created the covers. This was work the printer wouldn't have had were it not for the artists. I tackled Campbell about this. I asked him why the artist was getting paid such a tiny fraction of what the printer was getting, when all he had to do was set-up the press to take this already beautifully created work. Why was the printer getting so much money? John Campbell's answer was, 'Strong union.' At that time, full-colour work was being done from copper plates, and a copper plate the size of a digest magazine would cost you 850 to 900 dollars, and you needed four of them to print your magazine. I was getting about 250 dollars for the artwork, roughly one tenth of what the printer got." So even less than the writer then. "Yeah, and no royalties. Things haven't changed a whit in that respect. Writers get paid by the word. If we got paid by the brushstroke we'd be millionaires. On another occasion I was getting pretty irritated at the way my pictures were coming out, so I took six copies of *Astounding* in to show Campbell. One was heavily black, another was saturated with blue, another was saturated with yellow... I mean, there wasn't a single one there that was similar to the others, though it was all the same painting. There it

Cover illustration of *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October 1958 **The Door into Summer**, illustrating the Robert A. Heinlein serial of the same name.



was, six different messes. Campbell had never observed this before. The balloon went up. The next issue was handled by a new printer."

Something that has long bedeviled artists' finances, Freas argues, is the publishers' practice of operating on a work-for-hire basis, where all reproduction rights are purchased for a single fee. A long battle has been waged to shift the system to one more closely resembling the deals writers get, with each subsequent use of a piece of artwork generating a fresh payment.

"Another thing that distinguishes this from work-for-hire is that it retains credit," Freas says. "You're credited as being the creator. Whereas with work-for-hire they not only owned the artwork, they also claimed to be its creator. With work-for-hire you lose everything. It's not a good deal. Years ago they would routinely paint out the name of the illustrator, and we became quite crafty at working in at least our logos and initials into the work. The thinking of the publishers was that if people figured out who the artist was they could become quite popular, and God forbid, their prices would go up. They couldn't have *that*. You had to keep the artists in relative anonymity as long as you could, and work-for-hire achieved that. That was the deal with *Mad* magazine. Bill Gaines, the publisher, bought all rights, *and* the original and the sketches, *and* any subsequent re-use rights. That's total buy-out, to use the jargon. But Bill Gaines was an exception; he was reasonable to everybody who worked for him. He paid for the privilege of total buy-out, and we got paid well, though you owned nothing at the end. Many years after the heyday of Gaines's EC Comics, maybe 25 years later, he had a whole warehouse full of this artwork. What he did was sell off most of it, and he gave 80 percent of the proceeds back to the original artists, God bless him. That let a bunch of us eat regularly for quite some time. He didn't have to do that, he owned the artwork outright. But he didn't need the money himself and thought the proceeds should go back to the creators. He was absolutely something else."

Cover illustration of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, Fall 1993, Vincent Price – "some 47 figures in torment make up his features."



As to the materials Freas uses to achieve his images, they differ depending on the job. "I like acrylics, and work with them most. I like felt-tip pens when you can get good felt tips that are permanent ink and won't bleed all over the place. They're getting harder and harder to find. Most modern tools are quite frequently a pain in the tail because they're produced primarily for amateurs. They forget the necessities of the professional. Airbrushes are a good example. You can buy some very inexpensive airbrushes nowadays, made for the T-shirt and amateur painter. This is fine. But the ones I use have to be good, and I currently have five of them. I work on the basis of the disappearing airbrush. Ordinarily, the way I use it, it just disappears into the picture. It speeds up my painting and sometimes it does things you can't do, like putting a halo around a star, that would be too time consuming to paint in with a brush. But you can go *ptusssh!* and it's there with an airbrush."

What about computer-generated imagery? "I use the computer a bit these days, mostly thanks to Laura [his wife and Studio Manager, and an artist in her own right]. I don't really know much more about the computer

right now than how to plug it and unplug it. And I still don't know when it's safe to unplug it. Sooner or later I'm going to have to learn to use the damn computer, but I'm not happy about it." He laughs. "Honest to God, I'm not happy. I had one picture, in the '50s, and I believe it was also for *Weird Tales*, where I had these stretched-out faces going around a vortex. If I'd had a computer there would have been no problem in creating them. My solution to it, back then, was to draw the picture on surgical rubber, stretch the rubber, and then make a tracing of that. It was very time-consuming then, but with computers it would be practically instantaneous now."

He doesn't employ models as such. "Laura's a good photographer, among other things, and we take most of our own pictures and do most of our own posing. It doesn't matter whether we fit the character or not, it's just faster and easier to use ourselves as models. Then I use the photographs as the basis for red-skinned aliens or whatever; all kinds of nasty little monsters."

What's the strangest commission he's ever had? "It's a horror picture, full of rotting and mutilated corpses. This particular one was a private commission. It was a painting of a pun, basically, and the buyer was quite pleased with it. It won't be published until I die. Because that was the purpose of the commissioner. This is one of the most bizarre assignments I've ever had. The commissioner approached a number of artists over 60; his choices were people he could expect to die reasonably soon. This guy loves the old EC comics, like *Tales From the Crypt*, and he went to all the old EC artists and commissioned paintings to be made into limited-edition prints, and now he's sitting on them. He won't sell them until all the artists are dead." Kelly Freas chuckles and adds wryly, "It's what one should expect from our field, I suppose."

With thanks to Laura Brodian Freas for her help in facilitating this interview.

A new collection of artwork, *Frank Kelly Freas: As He Sees It*, with text by Frank Kelly Freas and Laura Brodian Freas, is published by Paper Tiger at £20.

Frank Kelly Freas's homepage can be found at: www.kellyfreas.com

Self-Portrait, with Melanoma, Final Draft

Paul Park

I was able to retire when I was 45, thanks to the development of several new applications. People asked me whether I'd be bored. But for me working had always been a means to an end, something to give me the time and freedom to achieve certain values that had always been more important than any job. I'm talking about the world of art and ideas, which is in some ways the only "real" world. I have always understood where my chief talents lie. It was my creative thinking that got me in on the ground floor of certain developments in software – ideas that literally came to me in the middle of the night. My idea of heaven was always to sit in my office and dream. Instead it was the rat race I found tiring, the commute, the competition, the infighting. There was nothing about my job at Macrosystems that I was ever likely to miss.

Since college I have enjoyed painting watercolours for my own relaxation. Over the course of several years I had finished a series of seascapes at Point Reyes, and once I prevailed upon senior management to allow me to have a show in the conference room. I sold nearly every piece, but even so, I wasn't satisfied with technical mastery. I was looking for something else. Often I imagined there was something inside of me trying to break out, something that would enable me to express myself and also

to attempt some universal themes. I'm talking about how a person can overcome an illness and a difficult childhood and yet still manage to make a contribution and achieve success, even in today's economy. This is an important lesson for people who are just starting out.

Of course it was the particulars that would make my story unique. Themes have to be approached indirectly. So I sat down and started thinking about the crisis periods in my life. This was in the house in Palo Alto, the summer after Jean and I split up. At night I managed to maintain a social schedule, but during the day I was mostly alone. I am a disciplined person, and I quickly established a routine that was comfortable to me: up at six, three-mile run, etc. And though I was sometimes discouraged by the difficulty of this new work, still in a way I was happy just to try and fail, to participate in something so challenging, even when I was suffering from "writer's block." Because in fact it is almost impossible to do justice to the complexity of real life, to imagine things – a conversation, say, or a telephone call – not necessarily from my own point of view. I have always been blessed with a strong memory, but I soon found that this was only one of the skills that goes into recapturing the past. There is also, paradoxically, the ability to invent.

Finally, as in business, you have to be able to distance yourself, separate yourself, make yourself cold even to subjects you care passionately about.

I can't pretend this was all I did, every day. I like to meet new people and spend time outdoors. But during that first summer I persevered, and by the end of it had managed to produce a half a dozen stories. I thought two were better than the rest. One was about the Macrosystems buyout, which had happened the previous winter, just when my wife and I were realizing our marriage was over. The other was about a summer long before when I had been sleeping with two women at the same time.

One night a week I took a writing class at the Stanford extension school. Later, sometimes I took the teacher out to dinner. She was the first person who suggested I send my stories out for publication, though to tell the truth, I wasn't satisfied with them. They seemed too "flat," too obvious. But maybe my standards were higher than any potential reader's, because I better than anyone understood how complicated the original events had been. Amy said it was a trap to think your stories were never finished, never good enough, and you ought to begin sending out your work as soon as possible as a matter of routine. She gave me some names and addresses, and on my own I ordered subscriptions to some of the leading periodicals, including *Ploughshares* and *Story Magazine*.

It was the editor of *The Arkansas Review* that sent me my first personal rejection, which Amy assured me was some kind of milestone. I mean instead of just a form letter. By now the class was over, though Amy and I were still seeing one another. She was a beautiful young woman just out of graduate school. Her skin was very pale, and she freckled easily in the sun. Sometimes we would drive over to Half-Moon Bay.

Part of the letter read:

...I'm not sure what kind of game you're playing; I'm just sure I don't like it. Is this some kind of experiment in meta-fiction?

Writers sometimes produce stories that amplify and comment on other stories (though usually they choose an author better known, not to mention more firmly deceased, than this one): *Grendel* and *Mary Reilly* are two obvious examples.

But I've never heard of anyone who would bother to submit a flimsy paraphrase of someone else's work to the same place that published the (vastly better) original. [...] So Mr Dandridge (or whatever your name is), if you are trying to make some kind of obscure and humourless fun at our expense...

I didn't show this letter to Amy. Instead I went to the library and looked up the back issues of *The Arkansas Review*. And sure enough, in Volume 18, Issue #2, I found that a man named Jaime Goldberg had already written about the Macrosystems buyout in a story called "Soft," published that spring.

And the editor was right. This was the better story, because it was more complete. I had written mine in the first person. But this was a third-person narrative, much richer and denser, and involving several minor characters. By contrast, mine read like a sketch. For example,

here is a paragraph from the first pages of "Soft":

The house was an old one by Palo Alto standards. It was built in the thirties in the Spanish style: white stucco and a red tile roof, and a long wooden gallery overlooking the garden. The neighbourhood was pretty, and convenient to the campus, where once she had imagined she might find a fulfilling job. Now, tonight, between the third vodka tonic and the fourth, she was able to remember these things, before self-hatred gave way utterly to rage. She was able to remember how her first sight of the house had filled her with a sense of joy, of love for Roger and an instinct for her own potential. It was only later, standing alone in the night under the whisper of the fan, her silver rings digging into the gallery rail, that she imagined that the house had eaten and digested her, or at other moments only slightly less fanciful, that the yellow, thick, encrusted plaster walls formed a stifling and protective cocoon.

Here is the corresponding section in my own story:

That year I was finally able to buy a new home with a balcony, which was a detail I'd always wanted.

I had been surprised when my wife decided to leave Palo Alto and take an apartment in Berkeley. I'd always assumed I'd lose the house. Could I have invented all her feelings from the expression on her face when I'd offered to move out? I had tried hard to imagine how she felt sometimes when we were having our problems, or I'd had to work late. But I'm not sure what kind of insight would have led me to suspect a drinking problem now. Nor had she once expressed an interest in any job of any kind.

Later, after I was able to distance myself, I decided I didn't like Mr Goldberg's use of commas. The whole thing seemed a little overwrought and sentimentalized – in fact it's hard for me to recapture what I felt. But I'll say this – I was furious. I supposed that a lot of the ins and outs of the buyout had been covered in the industry press and was a matter of public record. I knew there'd been an article in *Wired*. But I could only assume that Mr Goldberg had been in touch with my ex-wife and some of my ex-associates, had soaked himself in their side of the story, and had produced a work with themes very different from the ones I had envisaged – I don't know. Amy says I think too much about control. "Just let it come out by itself without trying to push." I tell her that's what my proctologist says, too.

Worst of all, Mr Goldberg had used my wife's and my real names. I imagined talking to a lawyer, when something else happened to make me pause.

"Soft" ends with Jean moving out of the Palo Alto house after Roger has confessed to some extra-marital affairs. But it is told in retrospect from the vantage point of maybe a year later when the divorce is coming through. Jean writes Roger a letter, which says in part:

...so now I hear you've been going around with some anorexic blonde number about half your age, an MFA yet. It's hard to imagine she knows what she's talking about. Isn't that what writing is, being a good judge of character? I swear I don't know how you do it. I suppose all that money doesn't

hurt, but that's not really it. I can't believe there's still more to you than meets the eye. And I don't know why this still hurts me, but it does. It always will. Because I know with you it's always going to be the same old crap forever...

I had scarcely heard from my ex-wife since we split up. But the odd thing is, I did get a letter very like this only a few days later, while I was wondering if I should get in touch with her myself. The letter wasn't exactly the same, of course, not as well-written, but close enough. Yet "Soft" had been published months before, probably written months before that.

Amy Koslowski had gone to the writing program at Stanford, one of the most prestigious in the country. She was a highly competent young woman. She was a natural blonde, but she used henna on her hair, which gave it an unreal, reddish tint. No, the money didn't hurt, but then it never does. I could tell she was genuinely fond of me. We played racquetball, went for walks along the beach. And she certainly gave me lots of free advice about my writing. Of course I wondered sometimes if she really knew me. She had read my stories, but not Goldberg's. And as it says on the second page of "Soft":

...He had the kind of sunny, bone-headed good looks that many women find reassuring. To Jean, coming away from such a long depression, he seemed too good to be true – tall, athletic, a powerful and relentless lover, yet someone who couldn't help but admire a woman like her, because of all the qualities he lacked. [...] But she soon came to realize that he was like a blind man who has learned to compensate, that he had a combination of deviousness, mendacity, and narcissism that allowed him to function at the highest level without any brains at all.

This was closer than anything I had written, but it still missed the point. There's a great advantage in being underestimated, as I'd learned at Macrosystems.

The Arkansas Review was published from Fayetteville. I was intrigued by the editor's use of the phrase, "more firmly deceased." It made me think he knew Jaime Goldberg personally. So I called directory assistance for the numbers of everyone with that name in northwestern Arkansas. It wasn't a long list. I soon found the man I wanted. He answered after a few rings.

I didn't give my real name. I told him I had admired his story in *The Arkansas Review*. At first he pretended not to know what I was talking about. But when I persisted, he laughed and said the only reason "Soft" was ever printed was as an act of charity. The editor was trying to help him with his medical bills, owed him a favour before he actually died – he was very forthcoming. In 15 minutes I knew a great deal about him. Like most writers, he loved to talk about his work: "I was trying to do something a little different. But I'm not sure how it came out. To tell the truth, the subject got away from me."

By "subject," he meant the theme. "The character was too likable," he said during our second conversation a few days later. "I was trying to express something about the sheer hypocrisy of people, how they can ruin the lives of everyone

around them and not notice. You know, stealing other people's ideas and then not even realizing when he was basically fired. But there was something innocent about him, about the way he took his compensation in stock options for those years when Macrosystems was worth nothing. In some ways he deserved to end up with all that money."

"I found that poignant," I said.

"You're kidding. Christ, even I wouldn't go that far. But like I said, something else was coming out without my knowing."

"You seem to know the software industry," I said.

He laughed. "I don't know shit about the software industry. And you know it shows: I couldn't come up with even one technical detail. I don't even have e-mail. But I just can't stop thinking about this schmuck, I don't know why. I'm telling you, I dream about him."

"You must have done a lot of research..."

"What research? I made it up."

"Well, but you know Macrosystems is a real company. There really was a situation with an employee named Roger Dandridge..."

"Christ, you're kidding. Luckily no one reads *The Arkansas Review*. Luckily I'm dying. What did you say your name was?"

I repeated the name I had first given him, which was that of the protagonist in my story. "Well, that's very nice," he said. "Will you excuse me? I have to take some pills and then throw up."

I spoke to him several times over the phone. Goldberg had cancer. "Everybody thought it was AIDS, but don't you have to have sex for that? No, the stupid thing is, I never even smoked. With me, everything is second-hand."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No really, thanks for talking to me. I've been very isolated. And please, don't aspirate so much when you say my name. My mother called me 'Hymie' until last year. I was always a baby to her. That umbilical cord? It was made of iron. We were like two people on a chain gang."

"Where's your mother now?"

"Dead, and it's a good thing too. This would have killed her. Ha, ha, ha."

In fact the flattest characters in fiction are more complicated than people in real life. Hymie Goldberg was a bizarre kind of cliché, as if he'd been formed out of other people's prejudices. When I thought about him, it was hard not to imagine him short, bald and ugly, with a big nose and soft, childlike hands. I imagined a small apartment filled with cheap antiques and bric-à-brac and dying house plants. I imagined a lamp shade with a beaded fringe.

He was an out-patient at Washington Regional hospital in Fayetteville. Since he had no insurance, Medicaid was paying his bills, which didn't allow for much in the way of home care. I imagined being able to change that. I imagined sending him a cheque so he could hire a private nurse.

"Why are you doing this?" he'd say. "What did you say your name was?"

In fact it wouldn't be that much money. I was amused by the idea of a fictional character coming to life to comfort his creator. Or if you put it another way, a real per-

son being able to comfort a fictional creation. "It's because I admire your work," I'd tell him.

All this time I had been seeing Amy Koslowski. With her help, my writing had improved. Look at the following paragraph:

She stood naked by the window in the long afternoon light. I could see where her skin was roughened by the time we'd spent outside, even though she'd worn sun block. But she hated hats and wouldn't wear them, and as a result her cheeks now seemed to be covered with white dust, under which her burnt cheeks shone. That was in contrast to the rest of her body, which was a ghostly pink, all spattered with freckles and moles. She had worn bicycle shorts that left her knees uncovered, and there too the skin was burned and chapped upon the knees themselves, while behind them the soft skin was streaked with drops of water from her shower. How beautiful she was, her small breasts and flat stomach. She rubbed her short red hair with a towel, yet even in these simple movements she seemed tired and stiff. When she turned toward him and held out her hand, there was something careworn in the gesture, something guarded and self-protecting in the curl of her arm, though in another way she seemed to be revealing something too, a pregnancy, perhaps an illness.

There you see. The point of view has almost disappeared. Distance is the key. It's what you have to learn.

I remember the day when she was reading a story on my bed. She was lying on her stomach, dressed only in a pair of blue striped boxer shorts. I sat down beside her and put my hand on the small of her back. She said, "I was looking forward to the time when you'd stop writing about yourself."

"And you."

She shook her head. "You've written about my body. You've never written about me."

"Hey – we write what we know." I slipped my fingers under the waist band of her shorts.

"I don't like this part," she said. "He sounds like such a cliché."

She indicated a paragraph with her thumbnail. The protagonist is sitting in his small apartment, surrounded by 19th-century photographs, gilt-edged mirrors, and Victorian bric-à-brac.

"There's such a thing as going against type," she said.

"It's just the way I see him."

"That's a surprise. But you know it's such a clunky device, to have him look into a mirror."

"Physical descriptions are difficult in first person," I said.

"Tell me about it."

"This guy is the only Jewish faggot in the Ozarks," I said. "You don't think he's aware of playing a role?"

I slid my fingers into the crack of her thin ass. Later I revised the story according to her specifications. Hymie became Jaime again, and I took out much of his distinctive way of talking. But still she wasn't satisfied. One morning, dressed in a gray t-shirt and nothing else, she sat sprawled in a leather armchair, letting the pages drift one by one onto the floor.

She made a face. "It's still too static – something needs to happen. Someone ought to go and visit. Not just phone calls, but something personal. You know, bring him some soup or something. Not this boring fool – what's his name? Didn't you use that in your first story? You know, the one about the buyout."

"Yes."

She frowned. "So what are you trying to tell me here?"

"I don't know. Maybe I don't ruin everything I touch."

"Hmm," she said, "now there's a worthy theme."

Then, after she'd read a little more: "You say this is Fayetteville, but it could be anywhere. There's not a single detail. Or one: 'Washington Regional Hospital...'"

I shrugged. "It's a college town."

I suppose the narrative could be classified as fantasy. A writer is thinking about someone who might not be real. Or else a writer is inventing a character based on interactions with a real person, and at a certain point the character comes to life in a way a real person cannot. There are chunks of a new story embedded in the text, a story within a story that becomes the story itself. The moment of transition is made slippery, because of the use of painkilling narcotics. Here it is:

When I felt stronger I sat up, and sat looking at my reflection in the mirror for a long time. Then I put my hand out and put it on the surface of the glass, hiding my face. Looking down, I saw the paper on my bedside table, the paragraph I'd been working on before my last attack of nausea. What was he like, the man I was describing? I pictured him shaving for some reason, or maybe having shaved – staring at me as if into a mirror, caressing his slippery jaw.

There is a towel around his neck. He's in his early 40s. His eyes are deep-set and his jaw is strong, but his face is dominated by his high, sharp-bladed nose, and the wide, waxy slope of his bald head. He has a small moustache which he is trimming now with what look like surgical scissors...

I take up my pen now to continue, but there is a knock at the front door. I have left it unlocked for weeks now, to save me having to answer it. Whoever it is seems to know this and pushes the door open. I hear the rustling of a coat, and then footsteps down the long passage. The sound hesitates at the bottom of the staircase, and for a moment I imagine a stranger, someone who doesn't know I have moved out of my bedroom into my study on the first floor. For a moment I imagine I don't recognize the steps. Having just raised my eyes from the description of my protagonist, for a moment I imagine that it might be he. But it is only Amy, my student, who has paused for a moment to negotiate her burden through the passageway into the living room. I've given her my unlisted number and asked her to call first, but she never does. Now I see her through the double doors, carrying soup in a round Tupperware container. And now I am reminded what I should be writing instead of these stories I will never finish: her recommendation to the Stanford graduate program while there's still time, and I can still remember her work. Would she be this solicitous if she knew I hadn't done it yet? Would she smile hesitantly and then pause with that expression

of uncertainty? No, of course she loves me, and they all love me. It's just that she can't get used to how much I've changed, my beautiful hair all gone, my face so wasted that it seems all nose and eyes. "I've brought the mail," she says, peering at it nearsightedly and then telling me what I've already half-guessed, that the important-looking letter on the top is for Hyman Goldberg who lives down the street, and who routinely gets my mail while I get his.

Amy sits down beside me on the side of the bed, exhibiting the brave desire to be close to me that I am used to now in other people; if I were well, she'd never sit so close. And she starts talking about this and that, the soup and the mail still in her hands. She's a charming girl, really, slightly chubby, very shy, with wire-rimmed glasses and soft shoulder-length brown hair, streaked with pale gold now in the morning light, which slants down out of the high windows. She's looking out into the garden and seems distracted by the sight of goldfinches around the bird feeder; "What a beautiful house this is! You must love it. Is Alexander going to live here?" she says, meaning my son. But then she stops short, embarrassed.

"I don't suppose he will," I say.

She peeks at me sideways while I examine the backs of her hands. Her skin is covered with red freckles. It is so pale that it seems thin to me, stretched too tight over her sharp finger bones, and for a moment I imagine it to be entirely transparent, and I'm looking down as if through a tight plastic membrane, Saran wrap, perhaps. It keeps in place the green blood vessels and the red proliferating ones. It keeps in place the mottled sinews, the pink bones.

Now she tries to make up for what she said before, which I imagine she imagines showed a lapse of faith. "I mean until you're feeling better..."

"I'll feel better once I'm dead," I almost say, but stop because she has tears in her eyes. Very carefully, she puts the letters down on the quilt next to her leg on the side away from me. She puts the soup down too. Then she takes some bunched-up kleenex from the sleeve of her cardigan. For a young woman, it seems oddly old-ladyish to keep it there.

In fact as I look at her, as I think about that gesture, memories of her work comes back to me: artful stories she submitted during the fall semester. They are stories about herself: her problems with sex, her ambitions for the future, her fear of pain. In one, her mother tries to comfort her during a childhood illness by bringing her a series of inappropriate gifts. In another, she is mistakenly locked out of her parents' house, and spends the night alone in the woods when she is nine years old. In a third, her father takes her duck hunting, and she watches the ducks come crashing down out of the sky. At the time I tried to tell her how you could sometimes bring things closer to yourself by bringing them farther away. I'm not so certain of that now.

"I just wish I could do something for you," she says. "I wish I could do something just once. I feel my life has just started and already it has gone so wrong."

Again, this is quite typical. People's emotions come to the surface around me. It is a recent phenomenon: my sickness brings up something to the surface. Then they

find it easier to talk about themselves, and so do I.

I'm not feeling very well, and I ask her to help me get my feet up and lean back against the pillows. Now I can look at her more easily, as we are no longer sitting side by side. I ask about her boyfriend, a computer science major named Robert or Roger or something like that, but she gives a quick, dismissive gesture. Things are going badly, I guess. Robert or Roger has always been quite rude to me, whenever I have seen him around campus.

So then we talk about her work, which is easier. I am interested in the story she's submitted in her application to Stanford, because in a sense it's about me. For the purposes of making fiction, she has taken my illness and put it onto herself. I, in the story, am quite well, a robust, attractively professorial figure who sometimes visits her in hospital. I am touched by how much she has bothered to learn about radiation and chemotherapy, though in the story her cancer is of a different type from mine. The scenes in Washington Regional – a depressingly run-down facility – are vivid and well-drawn. She's captured perfectly the boredom and embarrassment of the disease, the impossibility of really talking about it, the way the mind tries to invent other topics, other futures for ourselves, even when there are none.

I am less convinced by the future she's come up with, an extended fantasy which threatens to over-balance the real story. In it the narrator is already a successful fiction-writer living in California. She's having a sort of quizzical affair with her student, a middle-aged tycoon and would-be water-colourist. She has grandiose ideas about the power of fiction, its ability to redeem human beings, change the world. "Isn't this fellow too much of a cliché?" I ask.

"Isn't he a little crude? Don't you think it might be better if...?" I ask, but she's not listening.

"Maybe you should try one final draft," I say, as if to myself. "Just one more should do it." But I don't think she's listening. She's looking out the window at the goldfinches. What's the good of talking? No, illusion always takes on its own life.

"It's just I'm so afraid," she tells me, and I reach out to pat her hand, not knowing what to say.

This is how her story ends, if I'm remembering correctly.

Editor's note: Amy Koslowski died in Fayetteville in the spring of 2001 after a long illness. She was a senior at the University of Arkansas. This story first appeared in *The Arkansas Review*.

Paul Park, one of America's most distinguished sf authors, has appeared in *Interzone* twice before, with "The Tourist" (issue 80) and "Bukavu Dreams" (issue 149). Born in 1954, he lives in Massachusetts but has travelled extensively. We are pleased to welcome him back to these pages, with another of his strange, subtle, stylish pieces.

MUTANT POPCORN



Nick Lowe

I greatly fear, young Bingo, that something sinister and terrible has arisen again in the west. In its stronghold of Dol Goldwyn in the shadowed hills of Hollywood, a dark force we once thought vanquished has been gathering power to itself, till now it is ready to launch a new assault of unprecedented strength and ferocity. Your uncle Bilbord saw something of its peril, when long ago he braved Conan movies, *Krull*, *Willow*, *Legend*, and sporadic later efforts generally marked by "Dragon-" in the title; yet thanks to plucky resistance by the market, none of these invaders was able to establish a permanent audience base, and for most of a generation we have been spared.

But no more; for since those days the world has grown soft, complacent. Long has the power in Hollywood gazed with envy on Robert Jordan's sales figures, and chafed at the doom that for a generation has seen junk fantasy thrive in all markets save that of the franchised film property, while lesser publishing genres like sf and supernatural thriller clean up so



effortlessly at the box office. Now fantasy is once again stirring in the world of movies; and before this year's end, we must face not merely the dratted Potter boy but the Ring itself. Already the merchandising armies are venturing abroad, with their grim catalogues full of collectable figurines and limited-edition duvet sets; already the writing is on the wall – do you mind if I throw your wall in the fire? See, this is elvish script: "QuickTengwar 4.0 or higher required to view this trailer."

I knew something ill was afoot when I was ironing my greys with the palantir on in the kitchen, and I saw that they'd finally made a movie of *Dungeons and Dragons*. A shudder went through me, for I knew that no studio would ever touch *D&D* unless it

truly believed that the time was ripe and the market at last receptive. Even the source credit ("Based on the *Dungeons and Dragons* Property Owned by Wizards of the Coast, Inc.") is faintly chilling, in its frank reduction of three decades of ludic engineering to a franchised abstraction and a stark statement of ownership by its latter-day conquerors. A *Dungeons and Dragons* movie has been mooted for decades, and even this incarnation has been knocking round since the 1980s, flirting at one time and another with the attentions of Coppola, Corman, and latterly Joel Silver. Yet although the *D&D* universe has in its time spawned swiftly-forgotten novels and several seasons of TV animation, none could ever find the formula to transmute gaming system into movie characters and plot; and the project passed from owner to owner, taking a little of the life from each while leaving only disenchantment in return.

D&D itself has been through lean years, of course, with the rise of gaming collectables culminating in the 1994 fall of TSR to its bitterest rivals (Wizards are proprietors of *Magic – The Gathering*), and few perhaps now remember the dramatic impact of the original RPG model on the nascent fantasy genre. For *D&D* arrived smack in the middle of the canon wars of the 1970s, when it was still in the

balance whether Ballantine would succeed in their unilateral attempt to define a major new publishing genre around the paperback *Lord of the Rings*, a genre in which *The Well at the World's End* and *Gormenghast* were somehow precursors of *Thongor of Lemuria*. It was nothing less than a war for the emerging genre's soul, in which the defenders of fantasy as a high literary tradition were at the end utterly and humiliatingly routed. In the event, what happened to the paperback readers of Tolkien was not that they became avid fans of Ariosto and *The Shaving of Shagpat*, but that they sat around rolling dice in the shape of the Platonic polyhedra and painting moustaches on lead figurines.

For what *D&D* offered was the first commercial kit for story, a paradigm for interactive fiction that remains canonical 30 years on, a generative grammar for the production of unlimited plotline, and a radical definition of fantasy as *par excellence* the genre optimized for this kind of unbounded, mechanized narrative production. And while it would be unfair to blame Gary Gygax for making Terry Brooks and his numberless epigoni possible, something irreversible did happen in the gaming boom of the '70s, not merely to fantasy but arguably to the very fabric of narrative itself – with some postmodern narratologists latterly proclaiming the interactive gaming model as a new millennial species of fiction, destined to overthrow

the tyranny of linearity and liberate us forever from the shackles of Aristotelian narrativity. And that, for a film version, is precisely the heart of the problem. *D&D*'s very power as an engine of interactive story is wantonly deconstructive of the Hollywood dogma of character and closure. The challenge and fascination of *D&D* as a movie project is that it has no characters and no story – only an open-ended game universe and rules of scene-generation. And while *Dungeons and Dragons* the movie isn't quite as paradigm-challenging as the recent South African juvenile *Merlin: The Return* (which had Rik Mayall as Merlin and Stonehenge surrounded by veldt), nobody could accuse it of embracing the challenge of plotlessness with anything less than total enthusiasm.

Like all truly incomprehensible fantasy-movie plots, the storyline of *Dungeons and Dragons* has a dreamlike indifference to waking-world causality and logic. Insofar as it can be summarized at all, it appears to involve a power struggle within the imperial city of Izmir (sic, but not as we know it, to judge from the defamiliarizing absence of mosquito-haunted backpacker hotels and grinning *dolmus* hustlers) between a big-costumed reformist teen Empress and a conservative council of elders dominated by evil cackling sorcerer Jeremy Irons. Somehow the key to all this lies with the control of different-coloured dragons through something called the Rod of Seville, pursued by Irons' people in deadly rivalry with the Empress's rainbow-nation Fellowship – which includes a jiving Wayans brother, an African-Ismiri-can lady elf and an actual honest-to-Cocklecarrot red-bearded dwarf (whose magical peculiarity, mysteriously unnoticed by everyone else in the film, is being *larger* than everyone else). One of the fairly few authentic *D&D* touches is that it hasn't a plot so much as a task-stack, with our heroes wandering around the map completing mazes, challenges and miscellaneous set pieces in order to fill their trolley with variform pieces of plot concentrate.

Nevertheless, the striking thing about all this as a

Dungeons and Dragons movie is how little it has to do with *Dungeons and Dragons*. Now in its Third Age, *D&D* has amassed its own detailed, specific mythology and geography on top of its rule system, but for better or worse the movie ignores most of the key elements of both. The general Tolkien-nicked speciation of characters is there, along with some of the job descriptions (our hero is a Thief), but the actual settings are made up ad hoc, and central elements of the *D&D* universe (such as the notion of Alignment) are entirely absent. Its driving impulse seems to be a need to pilfer the jewels from all its rivals, from JRRT through *Star Wars* ancient and modern to more contemporary genre icons. ("The magic school!" exclaims our thief hero with disarming frankness, if not hubris. "We'll break into the magic school!") There's a

Dungeons and Dragons –

Previous page title: Bruce Payne plays Damador

Inset: The Dragons

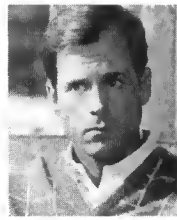
This page, right: Thora Birch as Empress Savina

Below: Zoe McLellan as Marina



garbage-chute escape and even a cantina sequence (remember them?); while a degree of nervousness about the possible charge of infidelity to source is all too visible in the quite disproportionate number of (a) dungeons, (b) dragons, and even (c) dragons in dungeons.

And yet it's all horribly entertaining, and the first fantasy movie to wear its ineptitude so proudly as to constitute a worthy successor to the benchmark crud-fantasy gem *Hawk the Slayer*. The Prague locations are as affordably attractive as the studio sets are endearingly ropy, and there are some excellent albeit fleeting landscape panoramas, while affordable effects shops from all over the earth have signed up for some watchable if poorly-integrated effects sequences. (Even *LotR*'s own Flat Earth chips in "magic effects, background dragons, and sky effects.") Above all, there are glorious coarse-thesping cameos from Tom Baker as the world's least convincing elf lord and Richard O'Brien as the host of the Crystal Maze of Death, and a magnificently dreadful hock of ham from the uproariously miscast Irons and his evil eyeliner. (Apparently they wanted Malkovich, and this was



The Gift –

Above left: Katie Homes as Jessica King

Above right: Greg Kinnear as Wayne Collins

Centre: Cate Blanchett as Annie Wilson

their punishment; proof that the Valar still watch over the affairs of men.)

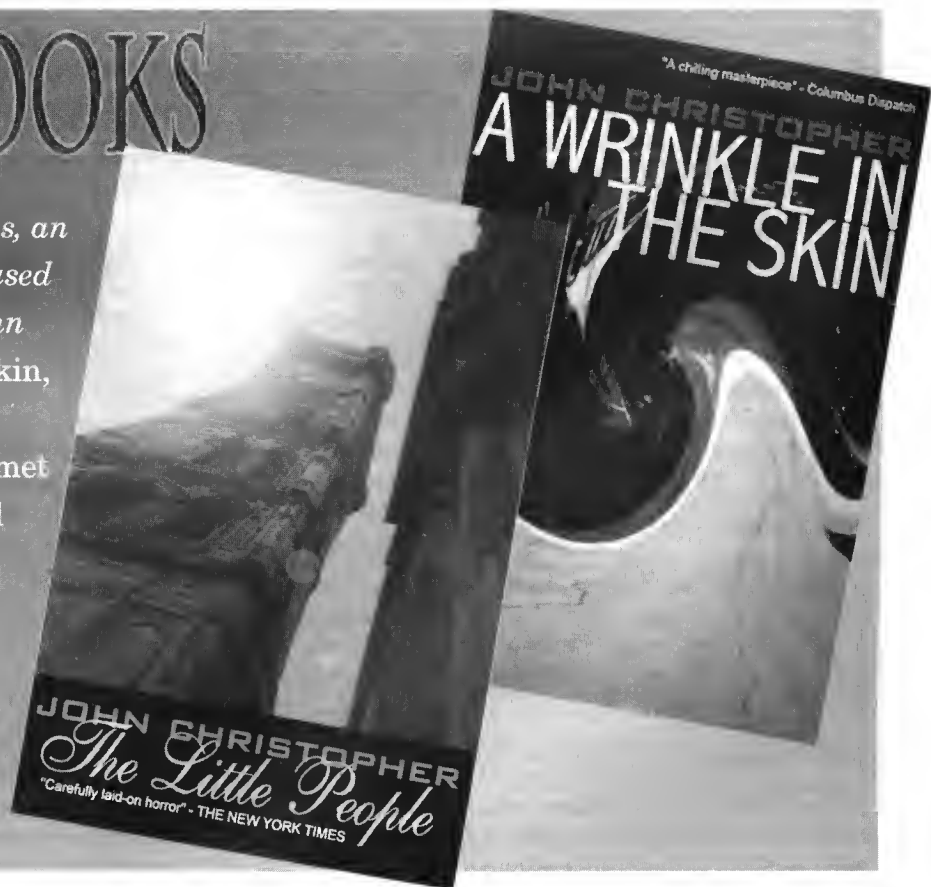
It's all so much more fun than Sam Raimi's *The Gift*, the latest and one can only hope last in a line of feeble thrillers about psychics and psychos in which the cast seem to be having a more interesting time than the audience. Aside from its bold attempt to

pass off Cate Blanchett as a southern widow (in "Brixton, GA") and Keanu Reeves as big and menacing, *The Gift* is mainly remarkable for having been co-written by Billy Bob Thornton, whose stock must surely now suffer if not a steep fall then at least a severe profits warning. Shapeless, paceless, and with no obvious audience, *The Gift* treats us to a glum parade of southern-stereotype plot suspects, squandering much fruitless ingenuity on trying to convince us that the killer is not after all the character it's obviously going to turn out to be. The soon-to-be-seen-as Galadriel makes a reasonable list of convincing as the single mom surviving on psychic readings (bizarrely using Kline cards, a particularly pointless conceit), but it's none too clear why anyone involved with the project wanted to bother.

If this is the future of fantasy cinema, you can see exactly why elf-dwarf-and-dragon projects might start to look perilously attractive. And that, my dear Bingo, is why my company Maia of the Coast, Inc., is casting for our new project *Young Olorin and the Cracks of Doom*, in which our hero and his chums at Ms Elbereth's wizard school get up to all manner of japes and outwit the wicked Lord Melkor's attempts to rig the all-Arda cosmogony finals. If you're interested, give me a ring.

COSMOS BOOKS

In January 2001, Cosmos Books, an imprint of Wildside Press, released trade paperback editions of John Christopher's *Wrinkle in the Skin*, *The Little People*, and *The Possessors*. The *Year of the Comet* followed in February, *The 22nd Century* in March, and a new John Christopher short story collection is planned for July. For more information visit our website: www.oivas.com/cosmos



Another mainstream critic who doesn't see eye to eye with all that fantasy escapism: "These are all things which do not exist, cannot exist, and have never existed. Yet these new fantasies are so fashionable today that hardly a person can state what is good art." (Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 1st century BC)

LOW POINT X

Pat Cadigan is organizing a one-day "2001: A Space Odyssey" event at the Science Museum on 19 May, to end with the presentation of the Clarke awards (see below).

Philip José Farmer is this year's SF Writers of America Grand Master, and Robert Sheckley is their Author Emeritus.

Robert Heinlein's latest posthumous glory is the naming of the Robert A. Heinlein Endowed Chair in Aerospace Engineering at the US Naval Academy (from which he graduated in 1929). Applications were invited, with the first incumbment starting "as early as August 2001."

Terry Pratchett was surprised at this year's British Book Awards ("Nibbies," shaped like giant pen nibs) with a special award for contributions to bookselling. As *The Bookseller's* editor put it, "He is the kind of author who tends to get overlooked when awards committees meet. One reason for this neglect may be that he produces best-sellers year after year, and so gets taken for granted; another, that the genre in which he writes is unfashionable among the kinds of people who sit on awards committees..." Terry: "I've had a lot of puzzled emails querying the 'services to bookselling' bit, but it's an industry award and an award for causing them to sell skiploads of books does have a certain four-square honesty about it. You could call it a Mid-Lifetime Achievement Award. It's quite a spiffy thing, too – so much better than those rocket ships which, frankly, they give to just anyone..."

Philip Pullman also won a British Book Award, for *The Amber Spyglass* as best children's book, while the omnipresent and pantheistic Harry Potter had to be content with "marketing campaign of the year."

Gordon Van Gelder of *The Magazine of Fantasy and SF* rose to the occasion when many April copies appeared without full stops. Copious replacements were posted to the web site, some reprinted with permission here:

Kurt Vonnegut is not being sued by Random House, which is odd since Random are suing e-publishers RosettaBooks for publishing Vonnegut (and other Random authors) after acquir-



ing e-rights directly from the author. Random claim that their contractual "exclusive right to publish... in book form" covers e-texts, usually assigned separately ("all rights not granted are reserved to the author"). Paul Aiken of the US Authors Guild said: "Everyone knew what a book was when these contracts were signed – volumes printed on paper – and this is nothing more than a bold and baseless retroactive rights grab." Interesting times.

Jane Yolen won a 2001 Christopher Medal (presented by a Catholic group called the Christophers, for books, movies and TV shows that "raise the human spirit") for her book *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?*

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Clarke Award. Shortlisted novels: *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia E. Butler; *Ash: A Secret History*, Mary Gentle; *Cosmonaut Keep*, Ken MacLeod; *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville; *Revelation Space*, Alastair Reynolds; *Salt*, Adam Roberts. Reynolds mutters enviously: "Being about half way through his book, I'm in total awe of Miéville and thinking of giving up this writing lark and leaving it to the experts...!"

Lord Farland's Bane. Could this be the Hugo-amassing secret of a certain glossy sf news magazine? "A locus was a creature that housed itself within the mind of a vile man or beast. It entered like a parasite, but soon assumed control of its host." (David Farland, *Wizardborn*, 2001)

R.I.P. **Richard Laymon** (1947-2001), a prolific US horror author since 1980, died of a heart attack on 14 February; he was 54. **Rick Shelley** (1947-2001), US sf author, died on 27 January. **Gerald Suster** (1951-2001), British author of horror and occult nonfiction, died

from an apparent heart attack on 4 February. He was 49.

Hard Questions. Ah, the eternal joys of TV quiz embarrassments. *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* featured this £16,000 poser in February: "Who wrote the Discworld series of science-fiction novels? A. Frank Herbert; B. Douglas Adams; C. Isaac Asimov; D. Terry Pratchett." *Science-fiction* novels? The contestant, who had inclined towards Herbert, eventually gave up. That same month saw a fleeting glimpse of sf in BBC2's *The Weakest Link*. **Anne Robinson:** "Who wrote the 1951 novel *The Sands of Mars*, featuring Martin Gibson?" **Contestant** (after an agonizingly long pause): "John Betjeman?"

Publishers and Sinners. The ailing C&B Publishing, owners of Collins & Brown, Pavilion, and the Paper Tiger sf/fantasy art-book imprint, are being taken over by Chrysalis.

Potterism. The "Spoken Word Album for Children" Grammy award went to Jim Dale's reading of what I rather like to call *Harry Potter and the Gible of Fire*.

Small Press. A new *Forgotten Futures* CD-ROM is out from Marcus Rowland, 22 Westbourne Pk Villas, London, W2 5EA. Cost £18. Besides role-playing game scenarios, there's a fat reference library of the relevant Victorian/Edwardian scientific romances (shorts and novels) and weird retro-tech articles.

Ghost Stories. Hot from arguing by geometric logic that the Leslie Charteris thriller *The Saint Sees It Through* (1946) was ghosted by Theodore Sturgeon, pulp sleuth David Pringle now reckons that *The Saint Steps In* (1943) bears the fingerprints of sf author Cleve Cartmill (chiefly remembered for his 1944 atom-bomb story "Deadline").

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Deep Cryogenics.* "His dart throwers had been sealed and 'washed' against snoopers, then maintained at minus 340° Kelvin in a radiation bath for five SY to make them proof against snoopers." (Frank Herbert, *Heretics of Dune*, 1984) *Dept of Eyeballs in the Library.* "She was spellbound. She took a few paces within, her amber eyes clambering up library steps, sliding along polished shelves housing neatly ranged books within a mellow wood gallery then down the stairs on the opposite side of the room." (Mary Brendan, *The Silver Squire*, 2000) *Dept of Anatomy.* "I felt my molars reach for each other." (Kathy Reichs, *Death du Jour*, 1999) "Collapsing in her chair, she felt her buttocks slide into the hole." (Nancy Taylor Rosenberg, *Interest of Justice*, 1993)

Restoring the Balance

Tony Ballantyne

“We are all willing participants in our own destruction.”

The black felt-pen scrawl caught Tim’s eyes, jostling for space amongst the graffiti that reached halfway up the wall of the end terrace. He wondered at its meaning as he crossed the litter-strewn road until Gareth, appearing in the form of an iridescent green beetle, distracted him.

“Something’s not right, Tim. Don’t go in the flat. Just keep walking.”

Tim pushed his hands deep in his pockets, his right hand clenched tightly around the yellow-clad lumps and kept walking. Straight past the wire mesh gate that led to the entrance of the block of flats, striding parallel to the mesh fence that strained dirty crisp wrappers from the wind. Gareth scuttled along the peeling paint of the fence rail, legs flickering like a clockwork toy. His deep, calm voice was at odds with his tiny, hurrying body.

“See the blue van, straight ahead? I’m sure it was standing across the road from the Spotted Dog yesterday. It was definitely by the crossroads when you entered the shop earlier.”

Tim turned his head towards the flats. Top floor, third window from the left. Caroline and the rest should be waiting for him. Philip would be making the coffee, two heaped spoonfuls of powder per mug. Ann taking a piece of yesterday’s MTPH from her yellow plastic bag, sealed at the top with blue tape, and passing it to Julian to drop in the saucepan as he mixed up a new batch. A dark figure looked down at Tim from the flat and for a moment he thought it was Caroline, but the hair was too short, the body too stocky. It was pointing at Tim, signalling to someone. Tim’s footsteps faltered: the side door on the blue van suddenly slammed open and two figures jumped out and rushed towards him. Gareth’s bright green beetle carapace split in two as he whirled into the air on glittering wings, and Tim turned and ran. Gareth landed running, transformed into his usual self, a five-foot-six, dark-haired Welshman.

“There’s two of them after you. A third is in the van,

speaking into a mobile phone. Turn left at the end and then sharp right, over the fence and into the waste ground. If they have any cars for back-up, they won’t be able to follow you into there.”

Gareth’s voice was calm and measured, despite his quick pace. Tim was gasping for breath already, his right knee clicking with each step. He ran over the broken glass at the street corner and skidded as he tried to turn. A group of young boys leant against the low mesh fence bordering the flats, looking on in interest. Behind him came the sound of his pursuers’ footsteps.

Gareth stood waiting by the bright metal fence, recently bolted between the ends of the two terraced houses, that blocked the entrance to the waste ground.

“Come on. Over you go,” he said briskly, walking back to the edge of the road to look back at the chasing men. “I’d hurry up if I were you.”

Tim looked up at the top of the fence. Smooth metal strips, the tops bent around to form blunt points.

“I can’t do it,” he gasped. “Show me another way.”

Gareth scowled. “Stop your whining, you spoilt middle-class twat. There is no other way.”

With that he walked to the fence and through it. He turned to look at Tim expectantly, but Tim had already gathered himself and made a jump for the top of the fence. One arm was wrapped around four blunt strips, the metal biting into his flesh, the other arm flailed for a purchase on the other side of the barrier.

Gareth shouted at him impatiently. “Hold the bag in your mouth, you stupid arsehole!”

Tim realized he was still holding the yellow bag of MTPH in his hand just at the moment he felt someone catch hold of his legs. He kicked back in panic and somehow managed to scramble his way over the fence, white lumps of MTPH spilling to the ground as he did so. He tumbled onto the grey gravel below, badly scraping his hands, lurched to his feet and began to run.

“Which way now?” he gasped. He realized Gareth wasn’t with him. He was still standing by the fence, arms folded, smiling faintly.

"Come on! What's the matter?" called Tim. He felt sick.

Gareth shook his head. "There's no point running. They shot you with a tranquillizer dart as you climbed the fence. You should be passing out any... time... now..."

Tim was lying in a metal-framed bed, staring at the ceiling. He could hear a dog barking somewhere nearby. A plastic jug of water and a bottle of orange squash stood on the table by his bed. He was in a room of an old building. The walls were covered in uneven white plaster, the ceiling too high. There was a smell of old food, of oven chips and baked beans that had been absorbed by the very fabric of the building. He wondered where Gareth was.

There was a man sitting at the end of the bed.

"Good afternoon, Tim. Are you awake?"

Tim sat up slowly, his head throbbing. The man wore an immaculately tailored dark suit and steel-rimmed glasses. There was a stethoscope hanging around his neck. He looked like a doctor. Tim shook his head. No, the man looked like a man trying to look like a doctor. Tim opened his mouth to speak and found it was completely dry.

"There's some water by the bed. Help yourself. My name is Martin, by the way."

The man waited patiently as Tim sat up and poured himself a glass. Gareth appeared as a pattern in the stream of liquid. He tore himself free of the water and floated across the room, assuming his human form just behind Martin's left shoulder. Martin turned to see what Tim was looking at, and then turned back with a smile. He nodded.

Tim took a drink of water and spoke. "Where's my father? I take it he's behind this kidnapping."

Martin gave the briefest of smiles. "Not exactly. He did promise not to raise any objections to our holding you. He understands that it's for your own good."

Tim threw the plastic glass of water on the floor in annoyance. "What right does he have to decide what's for my own good? I'm over 18, I'm an adult. I can do what I want."

Gareth's voice was low and scathing. "Oh, grow up, you little whinger. You quite obviously cannot do what you want. They've got you locked up in here whether you like it or not."

He walked around Martin and came to stand directly in front of Tim, bending over so that his dark face was pushed close. Tim stared into his dark eyes and his anger receded, leaving him feeling sullen and foolish. Gareth straightened, turned his back on Tim and returned to stand behind Martin. He nodded at the plastic beaker lying in a pool of water and spoke.

"Now pick up that glass and don't give them any part of yourself to get a handle on. Don't show any anger or fear; don't show anything except indifference."

Martin had remained silent all through the exchange. He had spent the time studying Tim carefully. Now he turned to stare over his shoulder.

"Is it standing behind me?" he asked gently. Gareth shook his head.

"Is what standing behind you?" replied Tim. He bent and picked up the glass, refilled it with water from the

jug.

Martin smiled, his high forehead wrinkling as he did so. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a yellow bag, sealed with blue tape. Inside nestled five or six white lumps of MTPH. He cleared his throat.

"I thought you might say that, that's why I brought these along. Let me explain. You're an addict, and you're locked in here with me controlling your supply. Maybe you'd like to co-operate."

Tim looked at Gareth, who shook his head slowly from side to side. He looked at the MTPH in the yellow bag and he felt as if first his mouth and then his whole body was watering with anticipation. He knew at that point that he was beaten. His eyes dropped to the grey linoleum of the floor.

"Yes. He's standing behind you."

Gareth's voice was tight with anger. "Be quiet, you little fool. He can't keep you in here forever. Caroline and the rest of them will be raising merry hell, demanding your release."

Martin's face was shining with interest.

"He's speaking to you now, isn't he? I can tell. Your whole body seems to relax when he talks. What's his name?"

Tim stared at his feet. "Gareth," he said.

"What is he? Where did you meet him?"

"He's an Earth spirit. An aspect of Gaia, the Earth goddess, the great balance."

Martin nodded his head. He straightened the creases of his immaculately tailored dark trousers.

"I understand. And how did this spirit come to meet you?"

"Whilst travelling through Wales. We were camping in a disused factory, sitting around a fire, tripping out. The ground was covered with old concrete slabs, but the earth was reclaiming it. Grass and weeds had pushed their way between the cracks, their green shoots were tearing the stone surface apart. It was then that I began to understand the power of the Earth, its power to reclaim all of Man's artefacts. That psychic resonance, amplified by the MTPH, connected me to Gaia."

Gareth was shaking his head in disbelief as he paced backwards and forwards behind Martin's chair.

"Give me a lump," said Tim.

"In a minute," replied Martin, glancing down at the yellow bag in his hand.

"He's stringing you along, you little idiot," called Gareth. "He has no intention of giving you anything. He's in league with your father, remember."

Tim realized Martin was again staring at him, fascinated.

"What is he saying? What's he doing?" he asked.

"He's pacing up and down behind you. He says I shouldn't trust you, you don't intend to give me any MTPH. Is that right?"

Martin ignored the question. "Do you believe everything that Gareth tells you? Did it ever occur to you that he might purely be acting in his own interest?"

"No. We're a team. Gareth helps me out."

"But Gareth is an aspect of Gaia. You are a human.

You are one of the enemy that is destroying the Earth.”

Tim shook his head. “No. Gaia understands that not all humans are the same. Some of us care for the Earth, and the Earth cares for us. Gareth helps me as I help him.”

“And keeps you supplied with MTPH. But look at you, dropped out of university, no prospects of a job, living in a squat. What sort of life is that? Is Gareth really helping you?”

Tim filled the plastic beaker with a little squash, and then topped it up with water. “I’m thirsty,” he said, taking a drink.

“That’s okay,” replied Martin. “We can take as long as you like.” He slipped the yellow bag of MTPH back into the pocket of his immaculately tailored dark suit. He pulled the flap over the pocket and smoothed the material gently. He straightened his trousers again so that the creases lined up perfectly. Satisfied with his appearance he looked up at Tim who had finished drinking his squash. Martin gave a friendly smile.

“Do you like my new suit?” he said.

“It’s very nice,” said Tim.

“What does Gareth think about it? Does he like it?”

Tim looked at Gareth who gave an angry sneer. “Tell him to stop wasting our time. Does he really think we’re going to fall for this police-show psychology? He’s playing nice cop and nasty cop all by himself. He’s trying to make us distrust each other so that he can get something out of us.”

Gareth walked behind Martin and made a rude gesture. Martin must have been tall standing up. Even seated, his head came almost to the height of the stocky Welshman. Now Gareth leant close to Martin and gave a big, beaming, vicious smile.

“Look at you, with your smart dark suit and your lily-white hands. A weak little man who has grasped a moment’s power over one of your kind. Enjoy it while you can.”

Gareth pretended to head-butt him, then stood back and scowled at Tim again. “Caroline is coming and she will have a plan. Tell Martin to go fuck himself.”

Tim smiled weakly at Martin. “He says you have a very nice suit.”

Martin beamed, pleased with himself.

Gareth sneered at Tim. “You soft little shite,” he said. He shook his head, a faint smile on his face. “Ask him what he wants. Is he going to give you back to your father, or what?”

Tim leant against the pillows. The metal loop that acted as a headboard pressed into his back. Despite Gareth’s scorn for Martin, he felt frightened. He’d known of other MTPH addicts whose family had finally raised the money to snatch them off the streets and get them into rehab. He had expected several weeks of painful withdrawal, long lectures about irresponsibility. Now that the possibility of actually giving up MTPH and Gareth had arrived, he wasn’t sure if he could go through with it. He shivered, and tried to stop. When he felt he could speak with a firm voice, he did so.

“Gareth wants to know what you want with us.”

Martin raised one eyebrow. “Gareth wants to know? What about you?” He adjusted one cuff of his immaculate dark suit.

“I want to know too. Gareth and I work as a team.”

“Do you? I get the impression that Gareth doesn’t see things that way. Do you Gareth?”

Gareth gave a snort and turned on his heel. He began to pace backwards and forwards again, clenching his fists in annoyance.

“He’s fucking with your mind, Tim.”

“I know,” said Tim.

“You know *what*?” asked Martin. “Was that addressed to Gareth? What’s he saying, I wonder?” Martin looked up at the ceiling, musing. “Telling you not to trust me, I suppose. But why do you trust him? Haven’t you noticed that the only teamwork Gareth participates in is that which ensures you have a regular supply of MTPH?”

Tim laughed. “Of course he does. I’m addicted to the stuff.” He paused, a look of surprise on his face. “Did I just say I was addicted?” He became more confident. “Well, I am. And I don’t care. Now when do I get my MTPH? You promised me some.”

“I lied,” said Martin.

Gareth gave a grim smile. “I told you,” he said in satisfaction.

“Of course I’m not going to give you any MTPH,” continued Martin. “It’s the cause of all your problems, not least of which is Gareth. Is he listening to this? I hope so. You see, Gareth doesn’t exist. He’s the main effect of the MTPH. All the pleasure, all the feeling of empathy that you get from the drug are just side-effects. Important side-effects, true, they’re the reason you take the drug in the first place. But they’re not what MTPH is about.”

He smiled. He adjusted his cuffs and continued. “You see, MTPH is a compound based on LSD and other more exotic hallucinogenic drugs. We’re not sure where it comes from. There are rumours it was developed by the US military as an aid to thinking. Others say it was manufactured by eastern fundamentalists as the ultimate in addictive drugs. A way to bring down the degenerate west. Personally, I think it just evolved. Drugs have been part of human culture for millennia. There is an element of natural selection in the ones we use. Why shouldn’t they evolve?”

He gave a bright smile. “Gareth is a hallucination that has taken on a life of its own. The MTPH has stimulated the less active areas of your brain causing an independent personality to arise. It can think and reason, just as well as you can. Why not? What are you, Tim, if not some thoughts contained in a human brain?”

Gareth was staring at Martin, open-mouthed. “The cheeky bastard. Tell him to go fuck himself.”

Tim ignored Gareth. He shook his head slowly. “No. That’s not true. Gareth thinks things that I couldn’t. How could that be?”

“The MTPH is stimulating the less active parts of your brain. Your weaknesses are his strengths. He’s a parasite, Tim. No, that’s not quite right, it’s the MTPH that’s the parasite. Gareth thinks he’s an independent being. MTPH doesn’t think at all. It’s taking over the world,

reprogramming us so that we need more MTPH, causing us to make more MTPH. The world is being colonized by a chemical compound."

Tim frowned. "What are you talking about?" he said in bewilderment, then he noticed Gareth, standing deep in thought, one finger rubbing slowly up and down his wide, flat nose. "Gareth? What's the matter?"

Gareth roused himself, as if from a deep sleep. He turned his back on Tim and began to pace up and down. "Oh. Nothing. I was just thinking," he muttered.

Martin was silent for a few moments. He looked at Tim thoughtfully and came to a decision.

"Well, I can see I've given you something to think about," he said. "I'll leave you here to talk things over with Gareth." He gave a laugh. "Hey, here's a thought! Maybe it's *you* that doesn't exist."

Gareth turned and sneered at Martin. Martin rose to his feet and spun around, and Tim felt a thrill of horror.

Someone had sewn a crude pattern of silver sequins on the back of Martin's expensive dark suit. They flashed and danced in the yellow light and spelt out a message: "There is nothing in here except your imagination."

Tim and Gareth sat cross-legged on the bed, facing each other.

"I don't believe him," said Tim.

Gareth was silent.

"I mean, how could you just be me? It was you that noticed the van, not me. How could that be?"

Gareth gave a tired sigh. "All sorts of things could register on your subconscious. Maybe I'm better at picking them up than you. I didn't see the message sewn in the back of his suit. How could I? You didn't expect it to be there, I extrapolate what I see from what you know. Let's experiment. Why don't I step outside and see what's beyond the wall? What do you think is out there, Tim?"

Tim screwed up his eyes, brought up his knees close to his face and hugged his legs. He began to rock back and forth.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't care. I need MTPH. I'm beginning to feel all empty inside. I'm losing contact with Gaia. I feel I'm losing you."

"If what Martin said is true, that's because the MTPH isn't stimulating the part of your brain that produces me. Now think. What's outside?"

Tim tilted his head. He could hear a dog barking in the distance. There was a sudden shout and the barking stopped. He shrugged. "I've no idea. A guard compound. Why don't you go and take a look?"

"I will," said Gareth, and he changed into a green butterfly that fluttered towards the semicircular window set high up in the wall behind the bed.

Tim sprang to his feet and walked past the wooden chair in which Martin had sat and went to look at the door. There was no handle on the inside, nothing but a smooth featureless piece of chipboard. Tim rapped on it a couple of times: it felt quite hollow. He idly wondered what would happen if he shoulder-charged it, and then dismissed the thought. Maybe later, when he was desperate for MTPH.

Gareth had settled on the window, a green scrap of life on the wire-crossed safety glass. His voice shook as he spoke.

"I can see a stretch of grass and then a chain-link fence. There are dogs running up and down behind it. Black and tan Dobermans. There is another fence and then a stretch of gravel road with a white car parked against it. I can see a man in uniform leaning against the car."

Tim was quiet. It was exactly the scene he had imagined. He picked up the chair and walked back to the bed. He pushed the pillows onto the floor and balanced the chair at the end, just next to the metal frame of the headboard. Carefully, he climbed up onto the chair and gazed through glass. He was looking into another room. The metal grill of a loudspeaker could be seen on the opposite wall. It barked at Tim. Martin was sitting at a battered Formica table in the middle of the room, gazing at a television that sat upon it, thick grey leads snaking from its back to plug into sockets set in the floor. Martin looked up at Tim and gave a shrug.

"Sorry," he mouthed.

"Shit," said Gareth, sitting on the glass close to Tim's cheek.

Tim climbed carefully down from the chair and sat back on the bed. Gareth fluttered down and resumed human form, a look of horrified despair settling on his face. Tim opened his mouth to speak and Gareth shook his head.

"I need to think," he said in a hollow voice. He rolled himself up into a little ball and vanished. Tim stared at the empty air for a moment and then lost his temper.

"Bastards!" He clenched his fists as he shouted. Martin was killing his friend. His eyes fell on the chair, lying sideways on the bed. He seized it by the back, jumped on the bed and began to swing it against the high window, shouting as he did so.

"Martin, you bastard! You're killing him! Let me out of here. Give me some MTPH."

He swung the chair again and again. The glass shattered into a crazed star pattern and few pieces tinkled down on the bed, hard little diamonds against the white sheets. There was a crackling noise and Tim heard Martin's voice. There was a speaker hidden in the room somewhere.

"I'm sorry Tim, but there's no escape. I just want you to know we're doing this for your own good."

The voice was coming from behind the bed. Tim pulled it aside to see a little speaker grill there. He began to hit it with the chair.

Tim had been sitting on the bed for some time, his anger exhausted. There was a rattling noise and the door swung open. Martin entered. A taller man came in behind him carrying a tranquillizer gun. He pointed it at Tim.

"How are you?" said Martin.

"I feel cold," replied Tim. "Cold and empty and aching. Gareth feels it far worse than me when we go without MTPH. It's a horrible way for him to die."

"He doesn't exist, Tim."

"What do you know about it?" spat Tim. To his surprise Martin looked sad.

"More than you think. I used to be an addict myself. I watched my spirit die in agony, not that long ago."

He stared at the floor for a moment, deep in thought, then he pulled himself together.

"Come on. We're going for a drive. I want to show you something."

He turned on his heel and walked from the room. The tall man with the gun motioned for Tim to follow.

Tim was led through high, dingy corridors and out of the front door of what proved to be an old house, one of several rundown properties in a forgotten street of a forgotten town. There was a black car parked beneath an overgrown plane tree that dropped pom-pom seeds onto the unswept pavement below. They got into the car and began to drive through streets of unpainted and decaying houses. The houses weren't deserted; he could see the people moving behind the unwashed windows. Tim felt a wave of sadness as he thought of his father's house. He would never have allowed his property to decay like these.

Something occurred to him. "Hey. Where is my father? Why haven't I seen him yet?"

Martin ignored the question. Instead he asked one of his own. "Tim, you said Gareth was a manifestation of Gaia. Tell me about her."

"Why? Gareth doesn't exist. You showed me that. Now you're killing him, just like you did to your spirit. You don't believe in Gaia."

Martin shook his head slowly. "That's not strictly true. I believe Gaia is a way of describing a natural effect. Think of a world covered in poppies, half of them black and half of them white. Suppose the world gets colder. The white poppies will die; they reflect too much heat away from themselves. When that happens, more black poppies will live to absorb what heat there is. The world will get warmer, and the white poppies can survive again. Conversely, if the world gets warmer, the black poppies die and the white ones increase, they begin to reflect the excess heat back again."

Gareth reappeared, sitting in the front seat, next to the driver. He looked ill: pale and drawn. Nonetheless, he had twisted around, a look of interest on his face. He was listening to Martin.

"You see," continued Martin, "Gaia was a name coined by someone to describe the way eco-systems maintain their own equilibrium. They believed the Earth found a way to heal itself, to maintain a balance. Most people thought this was nonsense; after all, humans were polluting the world. We were destroying everything, how could the Earth stop that? Gaia is a gradual process, but humans, they *think*. They act unpredictably. They apply intelligence to solve problems. How could Gaia fight the speed of the changes that resulted from our intelligence? It couldn't be done. And then MTPH appeared."

The car turned a corner. They were at the top of a long gentle hill that sloped down to the greater part of the city below. The houses got smaller, less expensive as they descended the hill. Below them were rows of terraces,

interspersed with wide two-lane roads. A cityscape, and yet it seemed strangely dead. The roads were cracked with weeds, the roofs of the houses shedding slates and tiles. Litter and leaves blew through the streets, stirred by the occasional car that drove past – but too few cars for such a large place.

"Everyone is giving up," whispered Martin. "All they care about is their next piece of MTPH. Civilization is dying. Gaia is restoring the balance."

The car stopped and they climbed out. Tim sat on the bonnet and breathed the early evening air. It smelled cleaner than he remembered. Gareth stood nearby, looking out over the view. He occasionally shivered with pain. Martin continued to speak, half to himself.

"I think it's odd, the way that the rumours of Gaia began at the same time as MTPH appeared. I mean, Gaia doesn't exist, it's not as though there's a real goddess. It's as if we're returning to prehistoric times, when humans had to put a personality to every natural effect. How did you come to get addicted, Tim?"

"Why should I tell you anything?"

Gareth turned. He was shivering. "Tell him, Tim," he said. "I want to hear more about this."

Tim shrugged. "Very well. I was offered some by Caroline, my girlfriend. She said it would help us become closer. I didn't think much of it to begin with, but after two or three hits I began to feel the empathy with her. That's when she showed me how to make MTPH for myself. She gave me the recipe, told me how important it was to add a little of yesterday's batch. It's like making bread."

"When did you hear about Gaia?"

"Caroline told me. Her sister had told her when she got hooked on MTPH."

Martin nodded. "What does Gareth think about Gaia?"

Tim looked at Gareth. He was looking down over the quiet city as he listened, his body flinching and twitching from withdrawal. A pair of yellow dogs trotted up the hill towards them. Gareth's reply came in little gasps.

"Tell him I don't know. He's convinced me I'm not an Earth spirit. What else is there to say?"

Tim stared at Martin. "He says he doesn't know. He's dying, Martin."

Martin lowered his eyes. "I know. We're all dying, Tim. The world is dying. There are less and less of us free of the drug. The schools and hospitals are closing from lack of staff, no one goes to work any more. Nobody is writing books or listening to music or sweeping streets. We just sit around in groups taking MTPH. What's it to be? Gareth or humanity?"

"Gareth," said Tim. "Even if he isn't real."

Gareth smiled at Tim. The two yellow dogs Tim had seen trotting up the hill came up to Martin and sniffed at him. They sat down by him, waiting for something. A little terrier ran around the car to join them.

Martin bent down and patted one of the dogs on the head. The silver sequins sewn on the back of his suit glittered feebly in the fading light. He spoke.

"That's the choice I would have made, before I was

cured of my addiction. Come on. We're going to meet your father."

He gave the dog's head a last rub and straightened up. His eyes widened as he looked around. A circle of dogs had formed around the car. They looked like pets that had run away. Two spaniels stood at the feet of a harlequin Great Dane, their long coats matted and dull. Alsations and Labradors rubbed shoulders with poodles and mongrels, most of them wearing collars, but all of them staring with bright eyes directly at Martin. A bloodhound walked forward and sniffed at Martin's pocket. He pushed its head away gently and a nearby Alsation growled.

Martin's bodyguard pulled his tranquillizer pistol from his pocket and waved it around uncertainly. The low growling increased, becoming more menacing as other dogs joined in. Two large dogs stepped forward to stand before the bodyguard. He dropped the gun on the ground. Again the bloodhound reached forward, sniffing at the pocket of Martin's suit. It pushed the flap of the pocket up with its nose and tilted its head sideways as it tried to take something in its teeth. Long white streaks of drool trailed down Martin's expensive black jacket. The dog took hold of something and began to pull. The yellow bag of MTPH was slowly drawn from his pocket.

"Hell's teeth," whispered Martin. "It's crossed over species. Now the dogs are addicted."

The bloodhound carried the bag carefully back to the perimeter of the circle and dropped it on the ground. It began to scratch at the yellow plastic with one paw. Two terriers rushed in to help.

Tim slowly backed away from the car. The other dogs were ignoring him, they could smell no drug on him. Martin looked at him in horror.

"Tim! Don't run away. Look what's happening! Civilization will end unless we each do something as individuals!"

Gareth had stumbled to his side. "Come on, Tim. Down the hill, I can see a churchyard down there. It's our only hope."

Tim hesitated for a moment. Martin's voice was close to hysterical.

"Don't listen to Gareth, Tim. He doesn't exist. He's a parasite, nothing more."

"Come on, Tim. I'm dying." Gareth could barely speak for shivering.

Tim made up his mind. He walked to the circle of dogs. They parted to allow him through.

Martin called after him. "No! Look. Look what's happening!"

Tim glanced back for a moment. One of the Labradors was standing, swaying on its hind legs. It was trying to open the car door with its front paws. Another dog had taken the bodyguard's shirt cuff gently in its teeth and was leading him to the back of the car. It wanted him to open the boot.

Tim looked on in horrified wonder. What sort of minds had sprung up in the dogs' imaginations, now they too were addicted to MTPH?

He began to run down the hill towards the churchyard.

Tim awoke, doubled up from the pain in his stomach. Gareth crouched beside him, a look of concern on his face.

"Come on," he said. "The berries from the Yew will keep me going for about six hours. We need to find a proper shot of MTPH in that time."

Tim groaned. The smell of the dark green trees that rose about him and sprinkled their needles on the smooth grass where he lay made him feel sick. Yew was poisonous, he knew that, but Gareth had insisted that a small amount would only make him ill whilst providing just enough of something to keep Gareth alive that little bit longer. Tim tried to straighten himself out, but the pain was too much.

"I need to rest a while. I feel so sick and so stiff," he gasped.

"Never mind that. We don't know where we are. We could be miles from Caroline. We only have six hours, if that."

Gareth's voice was urgent, and subtly different. Tim tried to focus on him through the pain in his stomach. Gareth's body had changed somehow. It was harder, greener, more angular, as if he was carved out of emerald. Maybe it was an effect of the yew, reacting with the remnants of the MTPH. Tim felt as if he was going to be sick.

"Gareth, I don't think that was such a good idea. Are you sure about the effects of eating the berries?"

Gareth swore. "Yes, I'm sure. I read it in the recipe for MTPH that was passed around. Didn't you understand it? I suppose not. Chemistry never was one of your strengths. The alkaloid is weakest in the flesh of the berries, but it should have the desired effect. Besides, if it hadn't worked, I'd have been dead anyway, and you didn't want that, did you?"

Tim was too ill to argue. "You don't know what it's like to be tired and ill." He moaned. He rolled on his front and tried to stand.

Gareth was scornful. "I just suffered from the worst withdrawal ever. Don't tell me about pain. Now, come on. Let's take it a step at a time. Out of the churchyard and maybe we can hitch a lift."

Tim stumbled forward, out of the shade of the trees and onto an unkempt gravel path. The old church ahead of him was as run-down and dilapidated as the rest of the crumbling city. A bright yellow graffiti was scrawled across the grey stones of one wall:

"Gaia will restore us to balance."

Scribbled beneath that in black felt pen was another message:

"We are all willing participants in our own destruction."

How true, thought Tim. Trying not vomit, he staggered past the church and out into the street.

Tony Ballantyne, author of numerous short stories, has appeared here most recently with "Single-Minded" (issue 162) and "A New Beginning" (issue 163). He lives in Oldham, Lancashire, and is currently working on his debut novel.



Fortune's Wheel

Lisanne Norman
interviewed by *Pauline Morgan*

A British writer, but more honoured abroad than in her home country, Lisanne Norman lives in Norwich with her teenage son. Her six novels to date have all been published in the USA by DAW Books, and are set in an sf universe which revolves around the Sholan Alliance. Sholans are feline aliens, some of which have psi powers. Some, including Carrie, her human protagonist, and Kusac, a Sholan, are able to form powerful psychic links and become Leska pairs. These pairings are sexual as well as psychic, so a large element in the novels involves the way in which different alien species cope with differing circumstances.

Lisanne has also published several short stories, all except one in American anthologies. She has attended British sf conventions for many years and used to be a familiar figure in the masquerades, usually wielding some kind of weapon. She is still dangerous, but these days is more likely to run you over in her electric wheelchair. Over Easter weekend of this year she was a joint Guest of Honour at the British SF Association's Easter Convention, "Paragon," held in Hinckley, near Leicester.

PM: Lisanne, you have now written six novels in the Sholan Alliance series and are working on the seventh; where did the ideas originally come from?

LN: I was working on short stories to learn the craft of writing. One of the shorts I was working on was the story of a black kitten struggling through the snow while remembering his father's lessons on life. The memories intrude on his pain and help keep him alive. The reader isn't supposed to know it's a kitten till the end when the viewpoint switches to a young girl and her father watching ice break up and float down the river when they see a small black bundle of wet fur – the kitten – and go to rescue him. A friend, Andrew Stephenson, was helping me by editing my stories and he said it was a cliché so why not try something different – make the kitten an alien instead? This started me thinking, "What if we met aliens who resembled animals on our world? Could we see past the animal to the intelligent person underneath?" And as the story had been about a kitten, so my feline Sholans were born.

To make them seem as authentic as possible I have made a point of studying large felines and not just domestic moggies – though I do have two pet cats whose behaviour I can observe at first hand. I have visited friends at Portland, USA, to study their panther and cougars. When I was invited to Eurofurence (a convention in Berlin in 1999), I got the opportunity to stroke a tiger and learned what I could about them.

PM: When you were writing the first, Turning Point (1993), did you envisage it as the start of a series?

LN: Yes, and no. I wanted to do more, but back when I began it, in 1978, I didn't finish it. It was in 1987, after moving to Norwich, rearranging my

life and having my son that I finished the first novel and then immediately began on *Fortune's Wheel*. The following year, Marsha Jones casually mentioned that if I finished it in time for her visit home to New Jersey for Christmas, she'd give it to her sister who was an editor at DAW Books.

PM: Did you encounter any problems enlarging and continuing the series?

LN: Again, yes and no. You need to keep copious notes on everything. Luckily I did that from the first and Marsha put together a Concordance of the novels – a massive piece of work and invaluable to DAW, as well as to me and the readers.

The other trick is to leave a rope hanging in every scene so you can go back to it build on it. And I *never* write in detail about something I don't need to until it is necessary to do it. If I get it wrong, it is written in stone! For example, I gave as few details as possible about the set-up of the ruling Clan Council and their parliament on Shola until the third novel, *Fire Margins*, where I had to go into it in detail.

The main problem I encountered was that I didn't realize I would end up with dates in my novels. The first two were not so closely mapped out as the others were later. I had to go back on my tracks and work out the exact time-scales for them.

PM: When you are working on a new novel, do you do a great deal of planning before writing?

LN: When I start a novel, I use pencil and paper. I use the Mind Mapping technique – a kind of flow-chart system – to map out the main ideas and develop them quickly, then go from there to mapping the whole novel. By then I can build a scene-by-scene breakdown of the whole plot and all the sub-plots – I couldn't keep the com-

plexity of the storyline going if I didn't use this system. Then I start writing it – on paper again. When I have the beginning right, I transfer to the computer and continue on it, working any bits that are tricky out on paper first.

PM: What has been the most difficult part of sustaining and developing your universe?

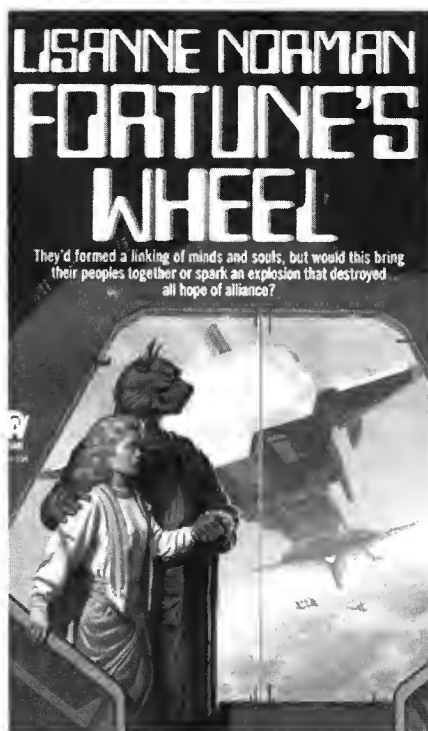
LN: Inventing new aliens! For the latest ones, the TeLaxaudin, I got extensive help from the late Mike Gilbert, editor Sheila Gilbert's husband. We talked over what I wanted then he drew them for me so I could have his drawing in front of me when describing them. I miss him and his talent. I also brainstorm at science-fiction conventions with friends. Recently they helped me design the four slave species in my series.

PM: How far do you go in making sure the science is plausible?

LN: Getting the science as correct as I can is important to me because I believe I have a duty to be as accurate as possible. But given the choice of changing the plot or compromising the science, I try to find a way around the science because at the end of the day I am creating fiction, not a science book. I usually use psychic powers to account for things science cannot do – thus taking the books briefly into the realms of fantasy. I have a network of friends who are experts in various fields of science, medicine, the military etc, that I go to for the information I need. Friends are the best resource a writer can have.

PM: You have been involved in historical re-enactment, especially with the Viking Society. Has this been useful in writing your novels?

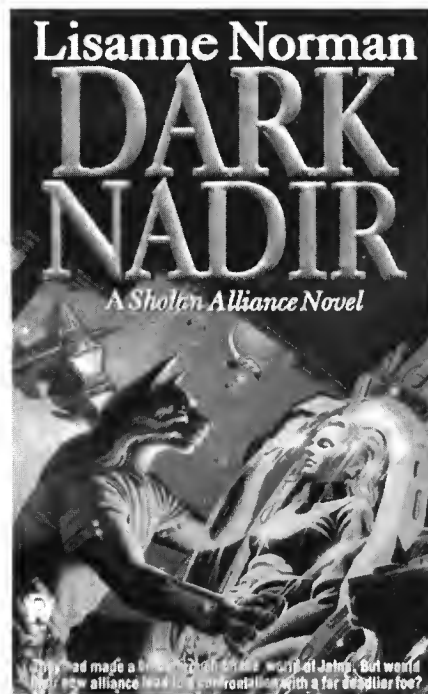
LN: Wonderfully useful. I have met so many different kinds of people, and been with them in some of the most gruelling circumstances, so have seen a lot of human nature at its best and worst. I was able to use my Viking experiences completely when writing a story recently about the ghost of a Norman knight seen at Battle Abbey on the eve of the 1066 battle – this was a short story in a DAW anthology (*Historic Hauntings*). And because I was a warrior on our battlefields using swords, a long Dane axe, and bow and arrows, I know what it is like to fight hand-to-hand and as an archer. My combat scenes reflect this. I also have led people on the field as a unit, which meant using tactics against the enemy, so I can plan my battles pretty well, though I do check out my plans with military friends before writing



them to make sure I don't do anything stupid.

PM: There are some who would say that the genetic computability between Carrie and Kusac is a scientific improbability. Did you have an idea how to resolve these criticisms before you finished Turning Point or was it the quest for a resolution of them that gave you the spur for Fire Margins?

LN: I spoke extensively to Jack Cohen about this and he told me it was scientifically impossible but why not use their psi powers to do it instead of trying to do it by science? So I did and it



is why none of the Sholans like Vanna the medic can reproduce the work Vartra did, even on enhancing the telepaths of his time – because he combined the genes with psi power, which is why they are unstable to start with. I also looked up as much as I could on genetics and got information from several sources on it before actually writing those sections. *Fire Margins* was written because they needed to be free of all Guilds and Clans and the only way they could do that was through an ancient ritual called the Fire Margins which took them back in time.

This is actually based on shamanic techniques which I spent a long time studying too – real Inuit Eskimo shamans, not what is commonly called “shamanic” today. The word belongs to the Inuit language you see, so can only apply to them.

PM: Your Sholan belief system involves the worship of the god Vartra. In Fire Margins you show us Vartra as an historical character. Does this reflect any of your own beliefs?

LN: Good question. The Sholan gods are based on a mix of shamanic belief and the Greek pantheon. Shamanic belief is generally accepted as the first real religion and evolved for a hunter-gatherer society, which is what the early Sholans would have been. My research included a lot of how religions evolved to fit the community that believed in them. So I had a lack of state religion, keeping it a personal thing, and coupled it with a pantheon. Like all pantheons, some worship one God, another a Goddess and so on, usually dependant on the region and landscape they lived in – sea gods for fisher folk, etc.

PM: As your novels branch out, including more and more major characters, do you find it easy to keep track of them, or do you feel that sometimes some strands tend to get sidelined? Would you find it easier to write two novels that parallel each other rather than one big, intertwined one?

LN: No. I tried to write *Fire Margins* as two novels in one, with half a chapter set actually 1,500 years in the past in the time of Vartra, Rezac and Zashou, and the other half-chapter set with Kusac and company. I got as far as Chapter 5 then called quits. It was too complex to write what was two novels. Sheila Gilbert said to redo it as dream sequences, so I did. I am totally happy with the way I write now. In each novel I try a new technique. In *Stronghold Rising* (the sixth in the series) I tried to start five months later, rather than immediately after

the previous book, and deal with the immediate consequences of the last book as flashbacks. I got thoroughly fed up of an adventure book followed by a slower-paced one as the characters came to terms with what had happened to them in the last book. I wanted to make it more exciting and interesting for me and the reader.

PM: How difficult do you find it trying to think like an alien species? And, especially in the case of Kezule, how well do you think you have succeeded?

LN: No one can truly think alien, though there are a few writers who do it really well, Octavia Butler for example. I prefer to suddenly remind the reader that my characters are alien by suddenly flicking a tail, or twitching ears to remind them this is not a human being they are reading about. It makes it easier for the reader to identify with a cast that is mostly aliens.

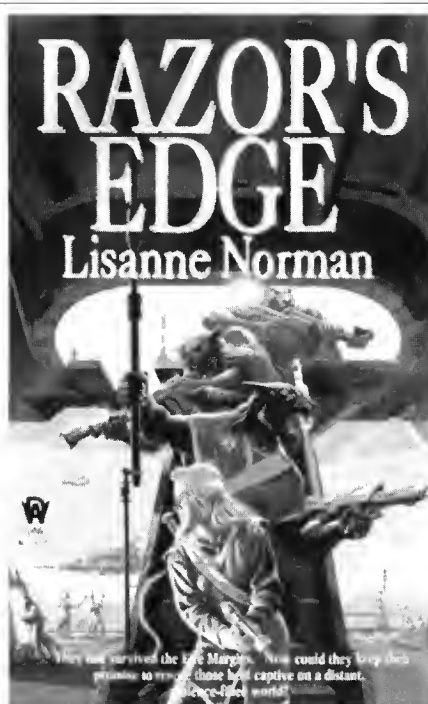
Kezule I am most happy with. To turn a bad guy into someone the reader can feel sympathy for, and understand what motivates him, is no mean trick. I worked very hard to do that, and I feel I succeeded. He isn't as cruel as people imagined; it is his background and upbringing that make him appear so. He is actually very moral, and has a strong sense of honour.

PM: Do you have much say in the covers on your books? How far do you think they represent how you visualize the characters? Which one are you most satisfied with, and why?

LN: Initially I had no say, but I have more now as the covers are done before the book is completed so I am asked for possible scenes yet to be written as suggestions for the cover. The final decision is actually Sheila's as she is also the overall art editor.

My description of Kusac in the first book had him disguising himself as a Keissian forest cat, which is what Romas (the cover artist) portrayed, basing his image on an Earth species. The description of him when Carrie realizes he's a person, is not the same as in the first five books. Romas did lovely covers but he stayed with the cat-head image rather than use my descriptions.

Each cover has good things about it, but my favourite has to be the one for *Stronghold Rising*, by Jim Burns. I have wanted a Jim Burns cover for so long, it was a dream come true when I got one. I hope he will do the cover for the new book. He phoned me up and had the same image of my Sholans as I have – of a being more human-like and more attractive than just a straight cat-face. He also knew exactly what I meant when I said that the area of Shola that Kusac lives in was like Crete



– he shares my love of Crete and the impossible blue-on-blue sky and sea that there is there. And he reproduced it for the cover of *Stronghold Rising* – though you can see little of the mountains behind them in the final cover.

PM: There's a tradition of art in your family; your brother is an artist and you studied jewellery design at the Glasgow School of Art. Do you think the artistic background helps you visualize your worlds and the aliens you have created?



LN: Not exactly. I have a vivid imagination but not enough talent in art to get it down on paper. I can with words. The ability to visualize is vital. I write like I painted, by putting down the immediate creative words no matter how badly the sentences are constructed. The next day I begin by editing what I wrote the day before, then go onto the new stuff. At the end of a chapter, I re-edit. By the time the novel is finished, I put fine touches in all over the place, analogous to using a fine paint brush to highlight areas in a painting.

PM: Do you have any other outlet for your creative talents?

LN: I used to make silver jewellery and sew my own Viking costumes and ones for the convention masquerades but I don't have the time now. I have also sold a few paintings at convention art shows. I am currently finishing off the two murals in my hallway that I started in 1996 – both with a Cretan theme. They are "The Bull Dancers" frieze and "The Prince with the Crown of Lilies." My hallway also has two huge pillars like those at the palace of Knossos where the original murals came from, painted on either side of the lounge door.

PM: How good/supportive have DAW Books been? Both in the early stages and now?

LN: Fantastic, both from the start and now. I feel like I am one of a family. DAW is run like a family firm with the old values of loyalty. When my spinal problem rendered me disabled, I told them I couldn't finish the book (*Razor's Edge*) in time to meet the production deadline as I was in too much pain. They phoned me and asked what they could do to help me. It was finished with an hour to spare before it went to the printers. The ending had to be rethought three times by me as the deadline got closer and closer, which is why it has the odd plot thread that is not explored as fully as originally planned. Sheila Gilbert (my editor) and Marsha Jones worked all hours. We were constantly on the phone and the fax that last week – and there's a five-hour time difference between New York and here!

At the very end of the book I was stuck with a fight at the space port and couldn't think of a way to break the deadlock between the sides. Then I remembered the good guys had a shuttle sitting there, fully armed. I thought, "They can't use that! It's using a sledgehammer to crack a walnut!" Then I said, "Why not? It's just what my character Jo would do!" So she did. She used the shuttle guns on the bad guys!

PM: How do you feel about being published in the USA but not in the UK?

LN: I'm a Scot, anything outside Scotland is foreign to me! Actually, I am not bothered. Sheila Gilbert asked me with the second book to use American spelling as it made it easier for them when copy-editing. So I also started using American words. I found the differences fascinating but then I love our language and its complexity and variety. I have been criticized for doing this by some friends, but I am writing for the American market, they are the ones that are mainly buying my books so it makes perfect sense to me. And the USA has the biggest slice of the world market too.

PM: Are there any particular problems that you have found in working with an editor who is on the other side of the Atlantic?

LN: It would be nice to be able to see her more often, but that's as much social as business. When I need her, I can always get hold of her. She is very reassuring and helpful.

PM: Are you happy to do everything electronically?

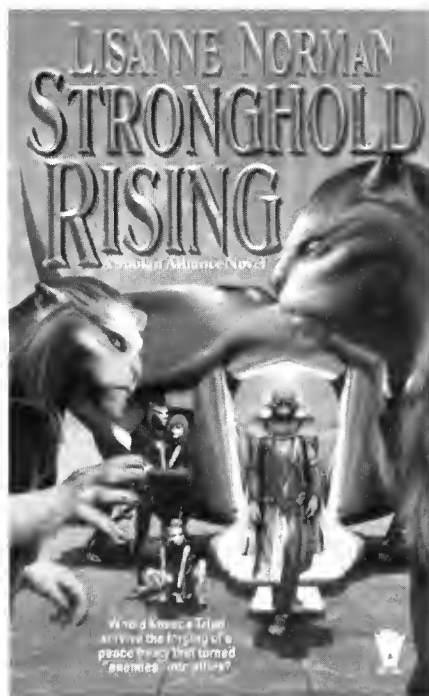
LN: I love the freedom the computer and a word-processor gives me. The ability to spell-check mis-hit keystrokes, etc., is great, as is cutting and pasting text around. And sending the novel e-mail definitely saves on courier costs!

PM: Have you been surprised by the reception/classification of your novels – romantic sf? Or by your success?

LN: Yes, and at first worried by it, but when I realized it didn't matter to me how it was classified other than as a form of sf, I stopped worrying. Success? I never thought about that. I am just glad that DAW wants to buy anything I have written so far, including short stories for their anthologies. To have the security of not needing to find a publisher for the next book is wonderful, as is the continuity of working with an editor as talented as Sheila – and Marsha too of course. I learn so much from both of them with every novel.

PM: How long do you think you will continue writing in this universe?

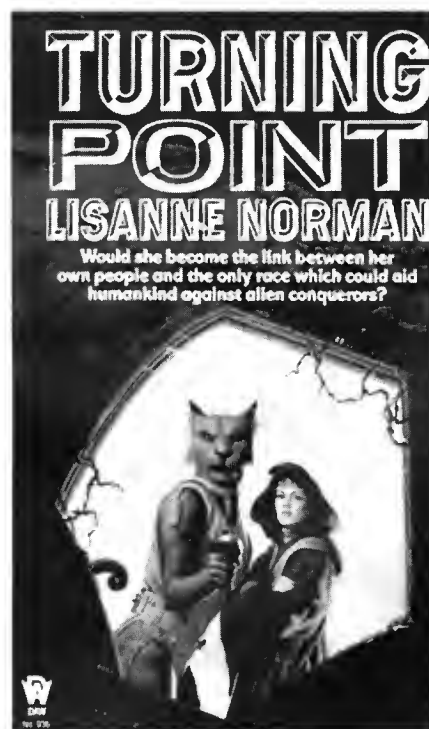
LN: I have a couple of other novels I want to write, not involving Sholans but based in the same universe. I loved the way Larry Niven wrote about his "Known Space," and I decided right from the start that I wanted to stay in my universe, whether it be 200 years from the now of the Sholan Alliance or further back



in the past, say, of the Valtegan Empire.

PM: Have you any plans, or desire write something completely different?

LN: Yes. I have published two short stories (in *Battle Magic* and *Spell Fantastic*, both edited by Martin Greenberg) about a young thief called Mouse. I plan to make her stories into a novel at some point. It is sword-and-sorcery fantasy, but with my own quirk on the idea of magic as scientifically measurable, and on trainable psychic abilities.



PM: Have you always read sf/fantasy?

LN: I prefer sf as a lot of fantasy is so much the same – yet another quest, yet another hidden prince/princess, etc. It takes a rare fantasy to entice me to read it.

PM: Are there any particular authors who have influenced your writing especially in the early days?

LN: Enid Blyton, Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling – and Angus MacVicar who wrote our English school textbooks as well as sf novels – were all early influences.

PM: You have an official fan club. What are your feelings about this? Do you have, or want to have influence over what goes on within it?

LN: I love it – what a compliment they are paying me! I work closely with them and go along to internet chat nights that they have on the Yahoo site for the club. My influence is that they keep fan fiction away from me and areas I meet them at because of the legal risk of being influenced by their fiction. But as they adopt Sholan personas and the chat-board is a small part of Shola, I get asked for input.

PM: You have now been invited to be a guest of honour at several conventions (including the 2001 Eastercon in the UK). What were your feelings the first time? How do you think the UK convention will be different from those in the States?

LN: Sheer terror – as it is with this one! The cons have been in the US and in Germany, Berlin to be exact, and Los Angeles, Seattle twice, and once in Atlanta. Paragon (Easter 2001) will be different because everyone knows me and I can't hide.

PM: At cons, do you still regard yourself as a fan?

LN: Absolutely! I am no different than I was when I joined fandom back in 1978 – well, maybe a tad older!

PM: Does your disabled status help or hinder the writing?

LN: It helps, because the day job gave me up when I told them there were certain parts of my work I could no longer do. It gave me the time to spend on my writing.

PM: Lisanne, thank you for your time – and good luck with the next novel.

ASCENT *of* Man

Eric Brown

He had only a vague memory of his birth.

He recalled, fleetingly, the heady rush of sensory impressions that greeted his arrival in the world: the slippery spurt of his exit, his mother's cradling lower limbs, and then the entry into his mind of the thousand voices. They were frightening and contradictory at first; only later, with the passing of time and the gaining of experience, would he learn to categorise the importance of the voices, ignore some and take note of others.

Blindly, even the dim light too strong for his new-born eyes, he had sought purchase on his mother's legs, and then found the torso of the person he presumed was his father. With gentle coaxing from both, he took hold of a fleshy flank offered by one of them, and suckled.

He felt the fingers of strangers probing his body, and heard in his mind the welcoming words of people he later learned were neighbours: close family and singletons adopted by the family.

"Greetings!" was the overwhelming thought. "Rejoice at new life entering the world, for without new life there would be no world!"

He settled down, thrilled by the attention, both physical and mental, of those around him. In time he opened his eyes, and beheld the wonder of his surroundings. He saw the great, munificent curve of his mother's belly, and pressed against it his father's frail lower limbs. To his

immediate right were the etiolated forms of his direct family members, their flesh packed around him in tight and reassuring proximity. Only chinks of light glimmered through the family mass from above.

He thrived and grew. His life demarcated by the regularity of the feeding cycles, he alternated between sleep and learning. He sustained himself from three main sources: his mother, of course; his father, less regularly, and from the swollen flank of a woman – no family member, this, but a singleton taken in by the family many cycles ago. With difficulty he would squirm about until his prehensile lips gained hold on whoever was offering nourishment. Once, he himself gave succour. He felt lips roving over his belly, and although he knew that this was wrong, nevertheless he acceded, and the mouth from below latched on and sucked.

Seconds later the family gave vent to a great indignant blast of outrage, and the illegal feeder yelped mentally and squirmed away.

He was reprimanded, denied two cycles of food, and thus learned his lesson.

When not sleeping, he ate and learned. His father filtered the superficial thoughts from all those around him and directed into his mind those thoughts he considered edifying and worthwhile.

He marvelled at abstruse philosophies and mathe-

matics; he wrestled with concepts way beyond the grasp of his puny infant's mind, angered at the gentle mocking humour in the thoughts of those around him.

The cycles passed, turned into mega-cycles.

He developed an aptitude for the theory of non-spatial geometry, and applied himself to the discipline.

Like this, lost in the thoughts of minds older and much wiser than his own, minds located half a world away, he grew to maturity and gained respect.

He lost his child's fascination with the physical aspect of his environment: what little his feeble eyes showed him, in the even feebler light filtering down from above, soon bored his febrile and probing imagination. The geography of packed and pressed flesh which circumscribed his dwelling place, a close horizon of fleshy protuberances, limbs and torsos and heads forming a panorama of limited variation, paled beside the vertiginous wonder offered by the free-ranging thoughts of the world's finest thinkers.

From time to time, though, as light relief from the wearying study of his discipline, he tapped into the thoughts of those individuals concerned with entirely different pursuits. He entertained himself with the images conjured by story-tellers and fabulists, by artists and musicians. He whiled away free hours listening to mind-songs, and marvelling at stories told by his favourite entertainers, the historians.

Oh, the fabulous tales they had to tell!

Immediately after study, his mind still ringing with the convoluted concepts of his calling, he sought out the school of past-tellers who captivated millions around the world with stories of How Things Once Were.

Of course, these stories were merely inventions, fictions produced to while away idle cycles... They could have no basis in fact, though some past-tellers vouchsafed their accuracy, and quoted learned thinkers to back the veracity of their tales. They claimed that things were not always as they were now, that change over vast epochs had resulted in this, the first truly fair and equitable society, an era in which Humankind had at last learned to exist in harmony and peace.

But some of the tales they told of the eras which preceded this, Humankind's Golden Age!

He had listened to them all, over the mega-cycles – had even strained his mind to search out the furthest and quietest of voices. His favourite tale – surely apocryphal? – was told by a shunned and limited guild of past-tellers who dwelled at the very northern pole of the planet. He had stumbled quite accidentally upon their muted musings when a mere infant, and over the mega-cycles had listened, awed, as their speculations developed and became ever more incredible.

They spoke of a time, many multi-mega-cycles before this one, which was so radically different to the world he knew that he had great difficulty in visualising how it might have been.

They spoke of a time in which Humankind did not encompass the world with its fleshy munificence. According to the past-tellers, the world then had been inhabited

by only a tiny fraction of the total who lived now. In this incredibly remote era, Humans lived upon the bedrock of the planet, leading impossibly lonely lives – often going without physical contact with fellow humans for minutes on end. The mere thought filled him with a sickening nausea, a feeling of panic at such inhuman isolation. But there were more such incredible speculations: these Humans, so the story went, could move about upon their limbs and ranged around the globe for distances of several torsos (though quite why they would wish to do so was beyond him).

The past-tellers went on to claim that these people existed in isolation not just physical, but mental. They could not, it was claimed, read the thoughts of their fellows, and were forced instead to communicate their ideas through a series of strategically modulated sounds.

He found this impossible to contemplate.

Oh, the loneliness of these strange beings who, if the past-tellers were to be believed, were the ancestors of modern Humankind! The terrible isolation of their lives! For his own peace of mind, he thought that these stories had to be myth, nightmares conjured by ghouls to frighten complacent citizens. And yet, again and again, he found himself returning to the heretic thoughts formed in the minds of the shunned school half a world away.

He grew, became respected in his field. His opinion was sought on various matters concerning his recondite discipline. He arrived at the age when it was expected of him to mate and procreate and add to the bountiful richness of the Human race.

For many cycles preceding this climatic event, he fretted that the change might never eventuate, that the physical conditions reliant upon his successful mating might never come about.

He eased his mind by dwelling upon the plight of those early, lonely *Homo sapiens*, the impossible visions of a sparsely populated globe...

The time of his mating came around, and he could read the nervousness in the minds of those about him.

The process of finding a mate called for an unprecedented effort of movement, a rigorous physical exertion that came about only once in the lifetime of every human being.

He could hear, in his mind, the siren calls of several nearby females. He had overlooked their minds before now, not interested in their fields of endeavour, but now the urgency of their calls awoke something buried deep within him, and he responded.

One cycle, soon after waking, he sensed the stress and tenseness in the bodies around him, and then a voice in his head – the reassuring tones of his father – told him to prepare himself.

He gripped the flank of his mother with his vestigial digits, and used all his strength in concert with those about him to effect the small movement that would bring about the change.

It was over in a second. The mass of his family slipped with sudden, shocking speed, and he found himself

aligned with one of the females who had called to him.

Their minds met, a mental coming together in harmony with the sudden and inexorable melding of their flesh.

He initiated his mate into the convoluted logic of his discipline, and she entertained him with her mindsongs. They copulated frequently, and within a dozen cycles his mate was with child.

He returned to his thoughts, sharing the fruit of his cogitation with like minds around the world – adding, he liked to think, an appreciable increment to the sum total of the knowledge available to all.

One hundred cycles later, a rare scare visited his family grouping. Above him, his mother and father fell foul of a rare and virulent disease. Their flesh thinned; their thoughts became incoherent. He called on the minds of those about him to exert healing pressure, and for many a long cycle the lives of his mother and father hung in the balance.

He feared for his parents, and the possibility that they might not attain the light. They had many mega-cycles to go before they ascended – they could not be cut off like this, so cruelly, in their prime.

The healing thoughts from his neighbours, however, proved efficacious. His concern, that his mate might give birth after the deaths of his mother and father, was unfounded. Over long cycles his parents grew strong, and their thoughts became active once again.

He gave profound thanks, and looked forward to the birth of his child.

Two hundred cycles later, his mate gave issue to a thriving girl. Great joy suffused the minds around him, and he called the ritual greeting to his child, and in the chorus of delight that filled his mind he was moved to hear the welcoming thoughts of his resuscitated parents.

He worked ever harder in his field of non-spatial geometry, establishing new theories and, on one momentous occasion, an entirely original line of thought which he knew would not be proven, or unproven, in the limited time he had left to him. It would fall to minds other than his to work on the conundrum he had engendered – but he could rest assured that his memory would live on.

His child grew, taking after his mate in her predilection for the arts: in time she trained to become a mindsinger like her mother, and he was gratified.

Between the hard mental toil of his calling and the appreciation of his mate and their daughter, he found time to return to that sequestered school of past-tellers. He relived again, with a shivery nostalgic frisson familiar from many cycles ago, the myths of the far distant past, the stories of how Humankind's forebears had lived alone upon the surface of the Earth.

He was older now, and wiser, and he petitioned the past-tellers with questions that as a youngster he had been too naive, or fearful, to pose.

He asked the venerable seers about the purpose of the ancient, lonely *Homo sapiens*: he asked if they were too primitive to have evolved philosophies, too ignorant to have any idea of their eventual destination.

The past-tellers answered him with supposition only: they did not know for certain what filled the minds of their impossibly remote ancestors, but they claimed that they could make an educated guess.

The ancients, according to the past-tellers, did indeed turn their savage minds to the problem of what might await them at their eventual ends. They posited other lands into which they might be reborn, afterlives full of rewards for virtue and compassion. But they were hopelessly unevolved, the past-tellers said; they lived only upon the land, could not ascend, and therefore could have no conception of the true destiny of their kind.

It was only with evolution, the eventual attainment of their present status, that Humankind could confidently predict the glory that awaited them.

He considered the world of ignorance in which his forebears had dwelled, the terrible state of physical and mental isolation imposed upon hapless individuals born too soon to apprehend the magnificent truth.

He considered the doomed philosophies of early man, the futility of their sciences. They had lived lives of simple pleasures, of maturation, procreation, and eventual death – whiling away the mega-cycles between with fruitless speculations as to the true meaning of their plight... and the thought that countless generations had died in ignorance filled him with a strange and keening melancholy.

He gave thanks that he had been born into this rich and enlightened age!

His daughter matured, fulfilled her destiny as a fine mindsinger, and he worked less and less at his discipline, finding reward instead in encouraging other younger, more agile minds than his own. He settled into the quiescence of old age, and looked ahead with anticipation to the time of his ascension.

The light brightened around him, a new element in the hitherto twilight world.

In time, as he knew would happen, his parents ailed. Their minds guttered, often unable to keep abreast of the thought-conversations that spanned the globe. They absented themselves for long cycles, recalling distant memories, nostalgic thoughts.

His mother thinned first, her mind full of the glorious rapture of ascension as she apprehended the light above her. She emerged before his father, and the mind-cry of joy she issued upon beholding the beauty of the light filled the family grouping with ecstasy.

His father followed shortly, adding his rhapsodic mindsong to that of his mother. *Oh, the glory*, he sang to his son, to all the world: *Oh, the ineffable effulgence of the Light!*

Any sadness he might have felt at the passing of his parents was soon purged by the evidence of their joy, and he gave thanks that they had ascended to their rightful destinies.

They passed away within a cycle of each other.

Their bodies withered and wizened in the heat, and he enjoined those members of the grouping within range to partake of the nourishment of his parents' flesh. He him-

self gnawed upon the skinny tendon of his mother's leg, the same leg onto which he had clung for much of his life.

As he ate, the light grew ever brighter, blinding his feeble eyes. He was aware of the clamour of the minds of those below him, asking what he could behold. He replied with the age old platitude: that only the ascending might look upon the light, and understand.

He lived for another mega-cycle, as the heat increased and his eyes grew slowly more accustomed to the once painful light.

He found his thoughts drifting then, denied the nourishment of his parents and living only on stored nutrients. He thought often of the fanciful notions of his childhood, when he had consulted past-tellers about the humans who had once inhabited the world. Ludicrous tales! Impossible fabulations! He knew this now, but was unable to stop himself from making one last call across the world to any past-teller of the old school who might remain to tell him that his memories were not those of a dying old man.

He found one aged venerable seer, so old that he too was ascending and was seared by the inexorable light.

He asked the seer to tell him of the early humans, the beings that dwelled in terrible isolation on the surface of the world.

The past-teller gave an amiable mental chuckle. *They did indeed exist*, he called: *they lived their lives of materialistic excess – giving no heed to the realm of pure thought – so that eventually Humankind might evolve and learn the truth. Of course, they knew not of their sac-*

rifice. They were but primitives who carried the burden of Humankind's long trek through time...

He considered this, and gave thanks, then saluted the countless generations of unwitting *Homo sapiens* in their blind march towards an unknowable but sublime futurity.

Soon he could open his eyes and behold, without pain, the wonder that stretched out around him in every direction.

He made out, in the searing golden light that burned down from high above, a sea of similar faces, roasted by the intensity of the radiation, as they peered about them in awe-struck wonder.

They had arrived, they had attained the highest of the high! His heart swelled to think that he was amongst them, these exalted beings, and he communicated his rapture to all around him.

As the heat increased, burning him, he considered for one last time the legions of the dead who had not lived to be granted the truth of the ultimate ascension.

He had only a vague awareness of his death.

Eric Brown's last story in these pages was "The Children of Winter" (issue 163). He has topped *Interzone's* annual story-popularity poll on several occasions, and he is currently in the midst of a trilogy of sf novels for Gollancz, which began with *New York Nights* (2000). His website may be found at: www.ericbrown.co.uk

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short stories by
Keith Brooke

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With *Return to the Whorl* (Tor, \$25.95), the concluding volume of his superb *The Book of the Short Sun*, Gene Wolfe indeed enacts many species of return. Worlds are revisited, memories reclaimed, identities redeemed, old narratives resumed. But some context is needed: *Return* is the twelfth (and final?) volume in a long cycle of novels, science fiction's equivalent of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*; and Wolfe's reader must be stalwart of recollection...

A Final Slingshot

Nick Gevers

The first wing of the great memory palace was *The Book of the New Sun* (four volumes, 1980-1983), in which the memorious composite hero Severian rose to the Autarchy of the ancient moribund world of Urth and brought hopes of renovation. In *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), he secured a New Sun for Urth by means of appeal to a court of angels (or aliens) in a higher universe; but the rejuvenation of the Old Sun brought devastation to poor Urth, that a fresh Eden might be born. The religious ruthlessness of Wolfe's vision, reflecting his Roman Catholic conviction that an essentially unguessable Divine Plan exists and is entitled in its terrible righteousness to sunder the worlds, was moderated if not palliated by a new phase of literary construction, the four-part *The Book of the Long Sun* (1993-1996), which revealed that a millennium or two before Severian's Apocalypse, many of the people of Urth had escaped the death of their Sun, dispatched in a generation starship to colonize distant worlds. The traditional human race had survived, but spent much effort departing the Ark (also Plato's Cave, and Babel) known as the Whorl for the Promised Land of the planet Blue, hampered by tyrants, gods, and their own inertia.

But by the time of the palace's latest extension, *The Book of the Short Sun* (three volumes, 1999-2001), Blue is settled, and its people are at least notionally out of the unholy subcreation that was the Whorl, out in the open and under the direct gaze of the Outsider (read God). Unfortunately, the saint who facilitated the exodus, the augur Patera Silk, was left behind, and the colonies are relapsing into anarchy and war in his absence; proper supplies of grain are still required from the Whorl; and the neighbouring planet Green is home to unpleasant blood-drinking aliens, the inhumi, who pose any number of physical and moral threats to their human victims, being essentially our own reflections. Horn, Silk's biographer, is sent on a quest to retrieve Silk; after dreadful experiences on Blue and Green, he in one sense fails, and in another suc-

ceeds; and *Return to the Whorl* is the account of Horn's homecoming. But who is in fact returning?

The astonishing literary brilliance Wolfe has brought to the Whorl Cycle defies ready summary. Suffice to say that Wolfe is as subtle a narrative artist as sf has ever seen; that his texts are elaborate labyrinths of meaning, densely encoded yet radiant with significance for the reader who embraces their challenge; that his command of language is profound,

permitting much fine characterization-through-dialogue; that his ability to complicate and recomplicate questions of identity facilitates penetrating interrogation of humanity's psychological and ethical imperatives; and that he weaves theistic imagery into his writing with a studied elegant ambiguity, never preaching, relying on symbolic implication at all times. The question of who returns to Blue under the name of Horn but in the semblance of Silk is the engine that drives this entire magnificent apparatus of high novelistic art; it is a profound question indeed.

Throughout *The Book of the Short Sun*, whose earlier volumes were *On Blue's Waters* (1999) and *In Green's Jungles* (2000), the narrative darts between the past tense of Horn's search for Silk and the present tense of their journey back across Blue, one's spirit in the other's body. Half of *Return to the Whorl* is the tale of how Horn became Silk on the Whorl, yet could never acknowledge that his mission was over (these chapters are ones Horn/Silk cannot bring himself to write, and are consequently composed from informed guesswork by his "children"). Horn's benighted wanderings through the ruins of his old home city of Viron are filled with pathos, and his desolate state is not helped by encounters with yet further versions of Silk; yet he performs an act of charity certainly worthy of Silk himself, a signal that for all his confusion some redemption can be obtained. And this note of cautious redemption permeates the first-person account that brings the epic to a close.

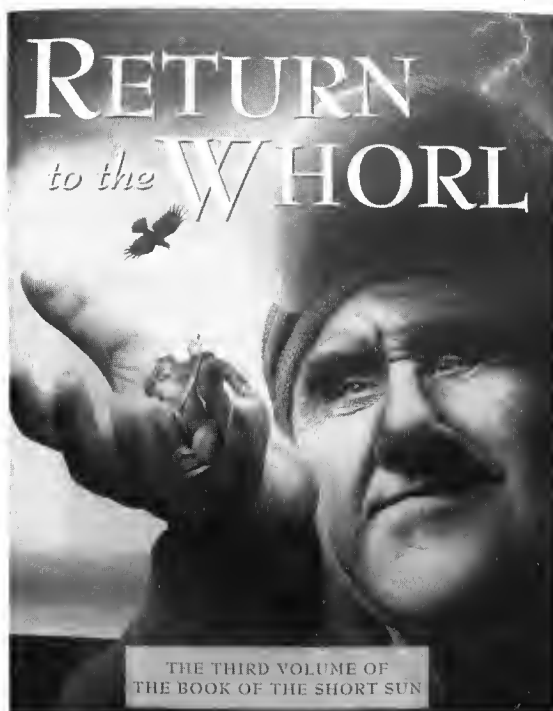
You can't go home again (from one



REVIEWED

GENE WOLFE

RETURN to the WHORL



THE THIRD VOLUME OF
THE BOOK OF THE SHORT SUN

Wolfe to another); but to return is perhaps to redeem. Thus Horn's first return to the Whorl; and the pattern is set. Horn/Silk returns to Blue, and liberates a succession of city-states from despots and aggressors. Horn/Silk returns to Green, and confronts the inhumani anew. Horn/Silk travels by astral means to Urth, the ultimate home of his people, and (just perhaps) imparts to Severian's career the redemptive spark that makes it holy. And home at last in the closing sections of *Return*, despite disillusionment and brutality, the loss of self and the abrupt termination of a limited amity with individual inhumani, Silk/Horn gives to the people of the colony of New Viron the beginnings of the understanding that, correctly applied, will permit their long-term survival on Blue. There is a Secret of the Inhumani, and, once revealed, it may just possibly galvanize humans to solidarity and social justice. Whether they will be wise and good enough to act on this is not Wolfe's to say; it is an implication only, and Wolfe, like Silk, must pass on to other things.

Some may find the conclusion of the Whorl Cycle sudden or contrived; but reflection suggests this impression is incorrect. Wolfe is no purveyor of facile or happy endings; more than any other sf writer, he comprehends just how complex and ambiguous existence is, and, ever subtle as an artist and conservative in ideological bent, he engages yet again in a slingshot ending. Resolutions lie beyond the page; the reader must generate her own, assembling a myriad of clues into the picture that satisfies her most (or, the authentic test, least). That is how the world works. And as a mirror of this world and other ones, *The Book of the Short Sun* has few literary parallels.

Richard Paul Russo is likewise a master of the understated narrative; his stories are spare and taut, and cast long shadows of implication. So his new novel, *Ship of Fools* (Ace, \$12.95), while in form a full-blown space opera of interstellar quests and perilous alien encounters, tends – very much in the fashion of Wolfe – to utter its dark truths out of the side of the mouth. And as the novel shades into horror, those truths become very very dark; the obliqueness of their presentation is an index of just how terrible they are, and of how metaphysically resonant the reader is entitled to find them. Long shadows indeed.

Ship of Fools is told in the voice of the cyborg Bartolomeo, adviser to the Captain of an ancient starship, the *Argonos*. In a fair allegory of the general human condition, this vessel has been wandering the Galaxy for centuries, searching for a suitable land-

fall, a colonizable planetary paradise that is in fact an unattainable, an ever-receding, goal. Chief among the fools in passage is the Captain, Nikos Costa, a scion and representative of the aristocratic families who dominate the ship's economy; he is in a constant struggle for political power with both the plebeians of the lower levels, inconveniently prone to rebellion, and the Church, whose Bishop, Soldano, is ambitious as well as prescriptively sententious. Intrigues and disputes of dogma whisper up and down the ship's endless corridors, and plots are hatched in its dingy cabins and warehouses of decaying forgotten technology; the *Argonos* is clearly a Gothic architecture, a vast spiritual simulacrum; and it is about to be tempted, and haunted, from without.

Bartolomeo, probably in conscious echo of Severian in Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, starts the novel as the Captain's sinister dark half, his devious counsellor and enforcer, but undergoes a progressive evolution of conscience and redemptive insight. This has two catalysts: his not entirely platonic admiration for Father Veronica, a saintly senior clergywoman; and a discovery among the ruins of a human settlement on the planet Antioch. All the colonists there have been hideously murdered, and the killers have left clues suggesting their provenance at a certain point in deep space. What Nikos and his crew encounter at that rendezvous is a manifestation of evil that Russo evokes but never quite reveals; the subtlety of this treatment allows the reader some latitude in deciding whether this is a specific and therefore generic horror, or Evil itself, a Satanic ploy among the high places of

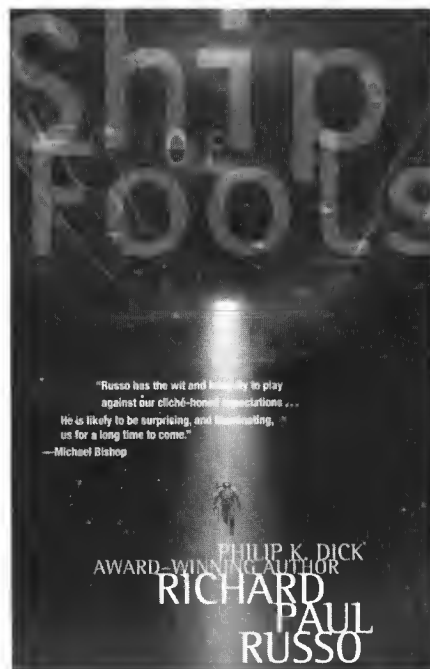
the stars. Interpretative tension adds to the seat-edge tension of the adventure into the heart of darkness; and the character of Bartolomeo is shaped in this terrible crucible. Whether his maturation into a Saviour will be completed before apocalypse overcomes the *Argonos* is a matter Russo's plot can be left to unfold; but it is a maturation of great and complex interest, however it ends.

Ship of Fools is a highly successful fusion of sf and the macabre, perhaps best construed as *Alien* with an intellect. It has its gimmicky moments, as any work of sf so knowledgeably grounded in the genre's gimmicky past surely must have; but it will be remembered far more for its powerfully iconic scenes and settings – stained-glass widows shining upon the void, charnel houses in space, colloquies in artificial deserts, chambers of treacherous gravity. Russo has added to the ranks of the fine metaphysical thrillers, no mean achievement.

Strong and stylish confrontations with darkness are also to be found in Tim Powers' first collection, *Night Moves* (Subterranean Press, \$40). Powers is, by his own admission, preeminently a novelist (and, it should be added, one of the best in the fantasy field); but it's remarkable how well his short pieces reproduce in miniature the intricate armatures of the mysterious to be found in his novels. Repeatedly, in tales of under 30 pages, the universe is given strange new underpinnings, and its logic is reorganized at right-angles to the norm. Perverse but persuasive dream architectures assume numinous solidity in mundane California suburbs; and the denizens of those suburbs respond, compelled by instincts both ancestral and idiosyncratic...

Two stories in *Night Moves* are collaborations with James Blaylock (and, accordingly, also appear in the latter's recent collection, *Thirteen Phantasms*). Both show very definitely the whimsical gentleness of Blaylock, a quality that accomplishes an odd harmony with Powers' sometimes fuliginous rigour. "The Better Boy" (1991) is an account of how an eccentric retiree tries to protect his tomato crop against pests by invoking crackpot revisions to the laws of physics; hilarious in detail, his obsession is futile, but redemption beckons anyway. A not dissimilar optimism pervades "We Traverse Afar" (1993), a mildly fresh take on the mentality of Scrooge that functions, niftily enough, as a guide map out of grief. But rigour is the keynote elsewhere, in Powers' four solo offerings.

There's a stern moral posture behind the surrealistic panache of such a tale as "Night Moves" (1986), in



which a man's long-dead sibling conjures a phantom universe out of the details of her passing and the nocturnal fantasies of others; abortion is condemned outright as the murdered soul orchestrates her sinister revenge. "Night Moves" shows the stylistic and psychological influence of Powers's mentor, Philip K. Dick, also a morally argumentative sort of writer; the lost sibling, more specifically the lost twin, is certainly a carryover from Dick's biography, and features more prominently still in "Where They Are Hid" (1995, but written much earlier). Here the twin has changed history, imposing a bleak bureaucratic socialism on post-1945 America; eradicating this

stilted puppet play is all the protagonist can do, even if to do so is to annihilate himself. To be Hawthorne Abendsen is a melancholy duty, but a duty it is.

Powers's evident conservatism does not incorporate any particular love for secret elites, and a colony of body-hopping mind parasites is read the riot act in "The Way Down the Hill" (1982); but will they heed it? Probably not, but protest is again a firm obligation. In this light, the regressively infantile narrator of "Itinerary" (1999) is irremediable, complicit in his own flight back through time to the horrid comforts of childhood; he has abdicated all progress, all responsibility,

and will languish forever in the absolute singularity of himself. His twin, the only Other he ever heeded, calls him back to the land of the living in vain. This is a formidable tale, complex and sideways in (again) the best Wolfean manner; Powers in his highly entertaining Story Notes feels obliged to assist his reader's itinerary through the story; but the moral is condign and inescapable.

Ingenious and powerful in its righteousness, *Night Moves* is a fine opening to 2001's crop of collections. A high price is being charged by Subterranean Press for entry; but it is genuinely worth paying.

Nick Gevers

Having Fun

Liz Williams

In Jack Womack's *Going, Going, Gone* (Voyager, £6.99) Walter Bullitt tests drugs for the American government – which, as I've always maintained, is nice work if you can get it. Walter is good at his job, and demonstrates a convincing and easy familiarity with some of the more esoteric substances known to contemporary pharmacology. Drugs are not his problem, therefore, but practically everything else is. He's being head-hunted by the sinister Kennedy clan to under-

take a job for them; a pair of ravaged ghosts keep turning up wherever he goes, pursued by an equally unnerving duo of female spook-hunters, and to add to all this, the 1960s New York that he's living in is not quite the Big Apple that we ourselves know and love – unless the city fathers sneaked in blue stop-lights and racial segregation while the rest of us weren't looking.

As befits the truly hip, Walter contemplates the mayhem that gradually emerges around him with a rueful, wary unease, and doesn't let it interfere too greatly with his second great passion: collecting old jazz 78s. But even Walter can't treat with his usual insouciance the fact that New York is gradually being encroached upon by a radically different version of itself, and that he's probably the only one who has a hope of doing anything about it.

This was such a fun novel that I forgot I was supposed to be regarding it with a reviewer's beady eye and just read it instead. I suppose it does take a little while to get going, and the pace of the first half could perhaps be improved upon. But who cares? The unflappable Walter is an immensely engaging protagonist; the villains are suitably grotesque (e.g. Nazi refugees from the Soviet atom-bomb attack on Berlin), the narrative voice is hilarious and the setting is, well, certainly different. Womack himself is clearly the product of a daring scientific experiment: claims that researchers

have finally succeeded in combining the literary DNA of William Burroughs and Damon Runyon should not now be denied. I will be looking out for more of his work (incidentally – should Womack's publishers be considering the demographics of his readership? – so will my 73-year-old mother, who also thought this was a blast).

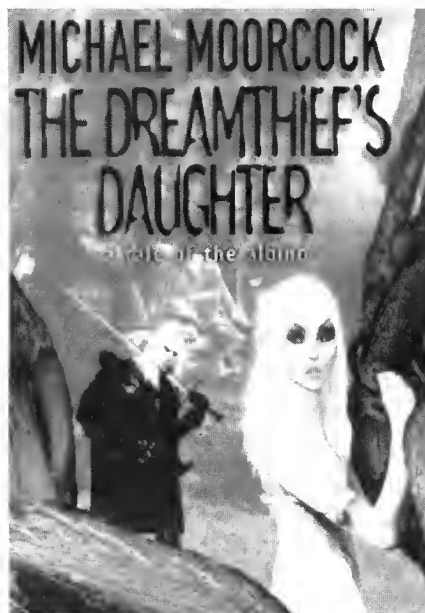
In the slightly future America of Linda Nagata's *Limit of Vision* (Tor, \$24.95) a group of scientists are



secretly working on a radical new technology – LOVs, or “limits of vision,” since the structures that they are creating lie at the limit of what the human eye can see. These tiny, created particles can enhance human intelligence, and there are also claims that, clustered together, they represent the first sentient artificial lifeform. Needless to say, plenty of people have reservations about such technology, and when one of the scientists involved in the project is found dead and there is a LOV-related incident on an orbiting space station, those reservations seem to be confirmed. The remaining project member, Virgil, goes on the run, desperately seeking to locate the last remaining cluster of LOVs on Earth. Travelling to Vietnam, he links up with a local reporter, Ela, and a band of renegade, technically enhanced children, the Roi Nuoc. Together with the growing, mutating LOVs and the assistance of the Roi Nuoc’s guardian, Mother Tiger, they hole up in a swamp whilst the increasingly hostile attention of the world turns upon them.

Nagata produces an interesting take on the popular subject of nanotechnology, combining it with an obvious, though effective, metaphor of American involvement in Vietnam. This, and her willingness to explore the greyer areas of her characters’ motives and actions, saves her from the charge of emotional manipulation (“lost tribe of hip kids = good; multinational corporations = bad”) which might otherwise be levelled at this novel. I would have liked to see more about the LOVs themselves, as Nagata deploys them rather too much as the force behind the action and adventure instead of a the central idea of the novel. To anyone who has been involved in the last decade’s work in AI, the LOVs are reminiscent of the claims made for A-Life: a self organizing system that might possibly demonstrate signs of awareness if one has first decided to jettison several hundred years of questions relating to consciousness. I do not think that Nagata is successful in her presentation of the LOVs as sentient – a self-organizing system that responds adaptively to external stimuli doth not sentience make – although their behaviour is certainly intriguing.

More interesting are the reactions of Nagata’s characters to the tiny potential monsters of their own creation. Initially, the LOV-enhanced intelligence of her team of scientists makes them sound, and act, as though they’ve inhaled much of Colombia’s annual output, complete with grandiose delusions and no small degree of arrogance. However, Nagata effectively addresses this issue by directly alluding to the analogy of



addiction and ego: once you’ve got LOVs, you’ll do anything to prevent their loss, yet their dangers are clearly drawn.

Nagata does not in this work exhibit the breadth of imagination shown by some of the other writers in this emerging biomech genre, such as Kathleen Ann Goonan, and she has only begun to explore just what her LOVs are capable of. But *Limit of Vision* is a solid novel and there is enough of interest here to make me curious about where Nagata’s LOVs would be a few years on from the end.

In *The Dreamthief’s Daughter* (Earthlight, £16.99) Michael Moorcock continues to update his own increasingly esoterically inventive mythology in a tale of Ulric Von Bek, a

cultured and principled scion of the clan of that name, who is hounded and subsequently captured by the Nazis. They are seeking a sword, handed down through generations of Von Beks, which contains great symbolic importance for German national identity. Aided by a mysteriously pale woman and a gentleman named Bastable, Von Bek manages to flee the more overt Nazi machinations and enters a strange underworld realm. It is here that the strands of Moorcock’s mythos are once again tied together, for Von Bek discovers that he shares a multiverse identity with none other than the infamous Elric of Melniboné. Together, they must work to keep Von Bek’s sword out of the hands of his increasingly powerful and unhinged cousin Gaynor, and thereby save it from the Nazis.

The multiverse is a varied and frequently confusing place, if that’s the right word for somewhere so transdimensional, but Von Bek is an effective guide. Since he is a person from a world substantially akin to our own, we are able to see its wonders both from his eyes, and from the perspective of Elric, who is after all familiar with this curious set of realms. It’s also easy to sympathize with Von Bek: almost anyone falling under the persecution of such a hideous regime would command sympathy, and because this aspect of 20th-century history is so familiar to us, we are drawn into what is actually quite a bizarre fantasy story. Whoever commented that the British government should send Aleister Crowley to debrief Rudolf Hess – since Crowley would be one of the few people to know what Hess was babbling on about – certainly had a point, and it’s a remark that has a particularly ironic resonance in the light of Moorcock’s skilful deployment of the more demented end of German paganism.

Fans of Elric himself are unlikely to be disappointed: Moorcock allows himself a florid hand with this particular piece of characterization, but the dreamthief’s daughter herself is an engaging individual, and the villainous Gaynor is both suitably compelling and appropriately vile.

Moorcock is very much an acquired taste and there is a definite sense here of deciding whether to be swept along for the ride. I did, and thoroughly enjoyed myself; another family member (a greater fan of Moorcock than I) found that the increasingly baroque plot rendered the novel unreadable. Whatever one’s feelings about this novel, however, there is little doubt that Moorcock’s breadth of imagination makes most of his contemporaries in the fantasy arena look like shambling dullards; he still possesses the power to dazzle.



Mid-21st century, and a message comes from far beyond the solar system – aliens are on their way, and will be arriving on Earth in three months' time. Joe Haldeman's *The Coming* (Ace, \$21.95) covers those three months, focusing on the impact of this news both on the macrocosm of America and the microcosm of the University of Gainesville, whose Astrophysics Department is the first to receive the news.

With a huge cast of characters and a sequence of events that is positively

action-packed (political infighting, academic scheming, attempted blackmail by the Mafia and the whole question of whether the extraterrestrial message is even real) Haldeman's hands are full long before he even gets to the aliens. A clumsier author would need a book the size of a house brick to deal with this volume of material, but Haldeman treats his story with a light, deft touch and steers it expertly towards a startling conclusion within 220 pages. This is a lean, economic novel, where nothing is wasted and

the reader's attention is swiftly grasped and effortlessly steered: I wish more people could write with Haldeman's assurance, because it would save an awful lot of time and trees. I read it straight through without stopping: not just eager to find out what would happen when the aliens finally showed up, but also because I very quickly came to care about the characters and the eerily familiar near-future world in which this is set. All in all, an impressive, elegant book.

Liz Williams

England in the 1980s. Doctor Who has been stranded on Earth for a century now. He's got a police box in his front garden, but it doesn't seem to do anything. He has complete recollection of the past hundred years, but no memory of what happened before that. He also has a daughter called Miranda.

Lance Parkin's Doctor Who novel *Father Time* (BBC, £5.99) is the fifth in the "stranded on Earth" arc. It's a pleasant enough read, with decent prose, a strong sense of the period, and some sympathetic characters who yearn for a cosy life which you know they're never going to have. It's even quite funny in places.

The trouble is, I don't think the author has a story to tell. That's not to say there isn't a lot going on. There are a fair few digs at Thatcherism, which at times make for some vivid imagery – there's a memorable scene involving the transformation of a run-down block of flats – but more often they come across as expressions of the only permitted political stance. There's a lengthy, soap-operatic storyline for Miranda which adds up to very little. There's a sequence involv-

Déjà Who

Paul Beardsley

spaceship rather than the shuttle. *Escape Velocity* is decidedly inferior, though, not least because Brake is inclined to waffle and to let his attention wander, resulting in jarring contradictions, and worse. One character actually forgets she's trying to escape from a Kulan with a big and bloody knife because – and I'm not making this up – she got engrossed in a conversation about *Babylon 5*.

But never mind all that. For 113 years the Doctor has been carrying a piece of paper instructing him to meet his forgotten companion Fitz at a given location on 8th February 2001. Now, after half a year since the arc began, it's 8th February 2001 at last. Before long the TARDIS is opening its doors onto new and intriguing locations where adventure beckons. (It's been a while since it last did that – considerably longer than six books.) And last but not least, Anji Kapoor becomes the first companion in bloomin' ages to have a distinctly female-sounding name.

Meanwhile, the Sixth Doctor and Mel feature in the Past Doctor

ing a NASA space shuttle which gives the impression that Parkin has done his research – until it flies into geostationary orbit. And there's yet another bunch of underimagined malevolent aliens who threaten to destroy Earth.

The overriding problem with the Doctor Who franchise is that it continues to churn out book after book about world-changing events, yet at the end of each book the world remains unchanged. Surely the authors must feel a sense of dissatisfaction, of boredom, and the urge to remedy the situation by engaging their imaginations to produce something that is at least a little bit original?

Apparently not. *Escape Velocity* (BBC, £5.99) by Colin Brake features some more boring aliens called the Kulan, who are running around Belgium trying to decide whether to conquer the planet. Structurally, the novel is similar to *Father Time*, particularly when the action moves into space – this time in a privately-funded





Adventure, *The Quantum Archangel* (BBC, £5.99) by Craig Hinton. I was keen to read this because, according to the author, it was partly inspired by Stephen Baxter's "Xeelee" stories. But hard sf is no easy option, and when the author confuses the galactic plane with the ecliptic, or tells us (twice!) that the Moon is 250 million miles from the Earth, it's glaringly obvious he doesn't quite grasp his subject. Come to that, it's pretty obvious anyway. And if there was ever a story in there, it's been crowded out by the platitudes, the cod-Miltonisms, and the banal and relentless fannish references.

Martin Day's *Bunker Soldiers* (BBC, £5.99) fares rather better. The year is 1240, and the Mongol hordes are marching on Kiev. The Doctor, Steven and Dodo have been in the city for several weeks, unable to return to the TARDIS, and forbidden to do anything that might save Kiev and thus change history.

Day's descriptions of Kiev leave something to be desired – we're told which buildings go where and so on, but I never got much impression of how the place looks, or sounds, or smells. Well, hardly ever. On the other hand, the sense of impending doom is superbly evoked, with ordinary people trying to go about their lives as if they had a future, while the rational and civilized governor gradually cracks under the strain. Given the potential of the period and setting, Day's decision to include an alien monster in the story might sound ill-advised, not to say naff. But I have to admit it works quite well, not least because it lurks in the shadows most of the time, and has an agenda other than the destruction of Earth.

Remembrance of the Daleks (BBC Worldwide, £19.99), the last TV story to feature the monsters from Skaro, has been released on DVD. First broadcast in 1988, it's best remembered for showing Daleks going up stairs. Among the various "extras" on the DVD, the most interesting is the commentary soundtrack, in which Sophie "Ace" Aldred and Sylvester McCoy add their (sometimes fascinating) insight. No, that Dalek casing was not meant to catch fire. Yes, they carried on filming rather than rescue the operator. Wicked!

Professor Bernice Summerfield, known to her friends as Benny, was a Doctor Who companion in the days when Virgin published the "New Adventures." When Virgin lost the licence, they kept her on as a solo adventurer, but later dropped her. Now Big Finish Productions Ltd – already responsible for her spin-off audio plays – have launched a new

series of books chronicling her further adventures. So far there's an anthology called *The Dead Men Diaries* (Big Finish, £6.99) which is edited by her creator, Paul Cornell, and Justin Richards's novel *The Doomsday Manuscript* (Big Finish, £6.99).

First impressions? Well, surely publishers shouldn't invite readers to judge (and condemn) a book by its cover? The "joke" of Bernice wearing a belt round her neck and a tie round her waist is almost as cringe-inducing as the "About the Authors" entries for Mark Michalowski and David Stone. Then there's the crap about the Braxiatel collection: "Collection of what?" is an invalid question, we're told; "it is a collection of everything." Okay, so if the answer to the question is "everything," where's the invalid bit?

As to the fiction, I wasn't so impressed with the stories that assume I already know and like Bernice, but the ones that centre on ideas and imagery are pretty damned good. David Stone's "The Door Into Bedlam" has moments worthy of Sheckley, including a man who is not actually invisible – but nobody ever sees him. Matt Jones's "Step Back In Time" is Mills & Boon with a sting. Stephen Moffat's "The Least Important Man" is a moving character study of someone more interesting than Bernice. Also memorable are Eddie Robson's "The Light That Never Dies" and Daniel O'Mahony's "Heart of Glass." Out of ten stories, then, five palpable hits – and a couple of the others aren't bad either.

The Doomsday Manuscript is a fast-moving space opera, the sort you race through on a wet afternoon. Bernice has half of the eponymous document – she and her companion Straklant need to find the other half if they're to find the Lost Tomb of Raglev. It's a fun quest, despite the fact that several characters display alarming degrees of gullibility. I do wish these authors would do their research properly, though – when a shuttle flying through deep space is rolled onto its back, it's clear that the author has no feel for the story's setting.

Also received:

Three books that tie into the war-gaming universe of *Warhammer 40,000*, including *13th Legion* (Black Library, £5.99), a Last Chancers novel by Gav Thorpe, *Necropolis* (Black Library, £5.99), a Gaunt's Ghosts novel by Dan Abnett, and the anthology *Dark Imperium* (Black Library, £5.99) edited by Marc Gascoigne and Andy Jones. The last of these contains stories by *Interzone* contributors Barrington J. Bayley and William King.

Paul Beardsley

A Most Stylish Writer

Chris Gilmore

The blurb for Tanith Lee's *White as Snow* (Tor, \$23.95) quotes an unnamed source as calling her "the Angela Carter of the fantasy field." It's a good parallel; Lee's range is narrower, but while she stays within it, she's a most stylish writer. I noted precisely one ill-cast sentence in the whole book (it's on page 201). Moreover, someone (I forget who) once accused Carter of setting back the cause of feminism by a good decade, through her concentration on such thoroughly victimized heroines; Lee is open to the same charge, and the current book exemplifies it no less than her stylistic brilliance. The sisters

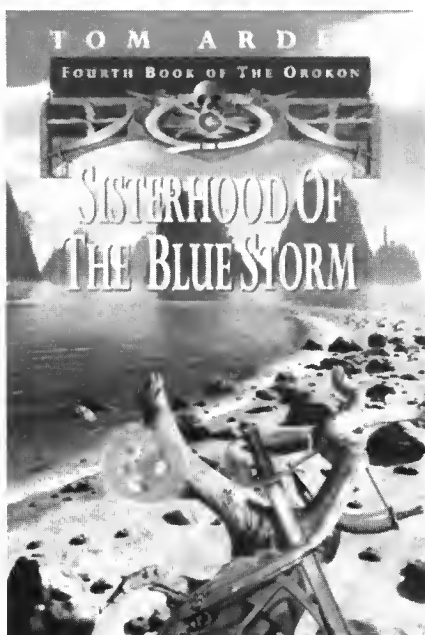


won't like it, for when Lee visits damnation on one of her characters, it's not for neglecting the daughter whom she bore after being deflowered through rape at 14; it's for aborting a second child conceived in love.

The story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is a fairly gruesome tale, even in the sanitized version of the Brothers Grimm, and as Terri Windling's introduction makes clear, many yet grimmer variants are known. But while Lee's re-telling carries on the tradition, her approach is truly original: she has chosen to conflate the tale with that of Ceres and Persephone, with the Wicked Queen (Arpazia) taking the role of Ceres, in search of her daughter by ravishment, Coira. The story alternates between their viewpoints, Arpazia's waning as Coira's waxes, but none of the traditional elements is left out: there are seven dwarves (Lee favours Tolkien's plural), one of whom Coira takes as her first lover. There's also a magic mirror, a poisoned apple, a prince and even a glass coffin – but every element bears the unique hallmark of Lee's individual genius. Not every book of hers is equally good, but in this one the combination of traditional themes and original variations precisely matches the mix of characters and the moods with which she is most at home. The result is a true masterpiece. If she never manages to equal it, it will be a wonderful culmination to a most distinguished career. On the other hand... Dear, beautiful Tanith, have you thought of conflating the stories of Hamlet and Orestes? Think what you could do with Claudius/Aegisthus Gertrude/Clytemnestra, Elektra/Ophelia!

To review the fourth book of a five-volume novel is not usually an easy task, but Tom Arden's *Sisterhood of the Blue Storm* (Gollancz, £17.99) is not only the next best thing to a stand-alone novel, but markedly different in tone from its predecessors in the "Orokon" series. Having, at the end of Book 3, allowed Prince Jemany and his friends to escape by magic carpet, he drops them into an entirely new locale, where even the gods are unfamiliar, and where for a good half of the book their quest must play second fiddle to the tribulations of a local pair of star-crossed lovers.

With almost all the "important people" from the earlier books posted in his *dramatis personae* as "presently off-stage" we have here Arden's take on the traditional *Boy's Own* adventure, as the plucky lads confront enemies ranging from the local slavers to the local demons by way of the Triurge, a stealer of souls. This allows little time for their ostensible reason for being there, the fourth crystal of the



Orokon – which hardly matters, Arden having plenty more up his sleeve. As the current book is clearly directed at adolescent boys, he loads the text from one end with crude jokes about defecation and masturbation, and from the other with simple literary jokes which will not be above the heads of boys who do well at English. For instance, the local heroine's nurse has evidently been dismissed without a character from service with the Capulet family, and a fairly dreadful masque which is scattered through the chapters is an unkind parody of Milton on a very bad day. Meanwhile, just to show he can do it well if he tries, there is also scattered through the chapters an ele-

gantly edgy lovers' dialogue in alternate lines rhyming to a complex scheme.

Just the thing for a bright 13-year-old's birthday, then, though I suspect many parents will look rather askance at the passage of love between an adolescent and an extremely camp eunuch. Still, we all do odd things on holiday abroad, and this book is definitely a holiday from the Orokon proper. Arden will doubtless tie the whole thing up in Book 5, and after that we'll see what he can really do. Meanwhile, a familiar grouch. Arden has divided his book into 76 chapters, each named, and with about half the names embodying a literary conceit of some kind. So is there a contents page? No, but there are six blank pages at the back. Gollancz is not the only offender in this regard, but it is the bearer of a proud and ancient name, which compounds the offence.

Satire works by exaggeration; the satirist presents those aspects of society which arouse his distaste in grossly hypertrophied form, the more easily to mock them. As an inevitable consequence, satiric storylines tend to be thin; as with utopian fiction, the viewpoint character gets a guided tour of (or blunders about in) the satiric realm, marvelling at or being horrified by what he sees. Lance Olsen's *Freaknest* (Wordcraft [PO Box 3225, La Grande, OR 97850, USA], \$12) is of this kind, but makes the mistake of trying to be a thriller at the same time.

For a thriller to work the reader needs to care about the characters and to find the context credible, but a satiric context is by definition incredible, as Olsen indicates to the alert reader by giving many of his characters joke names – even though the jokes aren't all that good. Magda Karter and Tymn Tai-ni, for instance, have no discernable relationship to, respectively, the document to which King John subscribed under duress or Dickens's ghastly sprog, but they contribute to the air of unreality which permeates the book – and would matter less if the story were not a bitter tale of innocence betrayed.

An outwardly respectable doctor has, for reasons which never become apparent, chosen to raise half a dozen children in solitude and under extreme sensory deprivation while at the same time downloading into their brains memories stolen from dead people, presumably for subsequent release. He dies, the children (now on the brink of adolescence) are discovered, and the question of what to do with them has to be addressed. That question is answered, and in the most callous terms imaginable, by the staff of ABNORMAL (a mental health insti-



tute). Meanwhile someone wants them killed, presumably by way of a cover-up, though in the sort of society portrayed it's difficult to see whose censure would count for anything with anyone. For this London of the near future is, in fact, far too violent to sustain the sort of social or economic activity necessary for the plot to make any sense, let alone to allow anyone the time or energy to consider keeping up appearances.

It's a pity, for Olsen writes well when he isn't intent on making point-less jokes. Much of the story is told through the eyes of Rykki, one of the children, and his depiction of a young girl trying to make sense of a wholly unfamiliar and totally deranged world, while at the same time instinctively seeking the love and security which ought to be her birthright but are nowhere available, might have made a most powerful book – had Olsen not chickened out of playing it straight. As it is, the story trickles from horror to absurdity by way of inconsistency and silliness. I've curled a lip at innumerable writers for taking themselves too seriously, but Olsen doesn't take himself anything like seriously enough.

Finally, a distinct oddity. *Everyone Has Somebody in Heaven* (Devora [40 East 78th St., Suite 16D, New York, NY 10021, USA], \$24.95) describes itself as a celebration of the Jewishness of Avram Davidson, and consists of: those few of his writings which are specifically Jewish in content; a few cursory reminiscences (to which Robert Silverberg contributes a one-line apostrophe); some posthumous, unpublished bits and pieces; and what describes itself (at 15 pages) as a "biography" of Davidson by Eileen Gunn.

It opens with a dreary introduction by Jack Dann, the principal editor (Grania Davis, Davidson's former wife, co-edits), who obviously thinks well of himself for having "written or edited over fifty books" – despite which he, or whoever else was responsible in this case, lacks the basic skills of a proof-reader. For the book is a mess at even that level, with innumerable literals; a familiar quotation misattributed; a well known name inconsistently spelt; running heads occasionally omitted; points misused or dropped; lower case used where capitals are intended; and an ugly, fussy design.

On two deeper levels, the entire concept is flawed. First, to "celebrate" Jewishness, which is a congenital condition, is by implication to denigrate gentility; otherwise the celebration has no point. It's as if I were to "celebrate" my manhood, my whiteness, the regional accent with which I grew up, and, yes, my Jewish ancestry; I

could do so only by implicit denigration of womanhood, and of all other skin colours, accents and bloodlines – which is an excellent reason for not doing so.

Second, though Davidson was fairly prolific and an excellent editor, his specifically Jewish published writings would barely fill a chapbook; and of these, few are truly worth preserving, because he was a very uneven writer. I can forgive the writer of "The Golem," with which this volume kicks off, almost anything – even the grossly sentimental and psychologically ludicrous "Let Us Sleep, Now"; but why resurrect the grindingly unfunny "Dr Morris Goldpepper Returns"? One of the least pretentious stories ever written, it still falls lamentably short of its billing.

Other items from the latter half are less tall stories than tall character studies, but failed for me because the characters, though extreme, were extreme in a dull way. "The Irregular Union of Mendel and Esther Slonin" and "Who is Ethel Schnurr?" both describe very dull people with very

dull obsessions. If I wanted to meet such, I'd be a psychotherapist; being a reviewer, I note that both are over-written.

Yet there are, in the first half especially, some objects of interest. Davidson joined the Israeli army very shortly after the state was first founded, and he sent to various Jewish-American periodicals some studies of life and character there which are well worth resurrecting. They're written in a limpid, *New Yorker*-ish style far better than much of his later manner, and may even be of some historical interest, though I think not; I suspect many of the characters described are what John Bayley calls "composites" – true to type and context, but not individually true. Even so, his sketch "The Socialist" manages to say in a page and a half as much as you'll find in the entire corpus of Ayn Rand. Worth borrowing for that alone, but to buy? That depends on how rich you are, and how extensive your shelf-space. If the answer to both is "very," OK.

Chris Gilmore

Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

Morton Rainey, a horror writer living alone in his house in the country, has lost his wife to a smarmy estate agent. He's trying to get on with his life, and his latest work. Unfortunately John Shooter, a farmer who writes in his spare time, believes Morton has ripped off one of his stories. Morton is sure he can prove his innocence within three days, but Shooter – who seems to anticipate Morton's every move – wants him to know he means business.

This BBC full-cast dramatization of Stephen King's novella, *Secret Window, Secret Garden*, was originally broadcast as three episodes in 1999. Adapted by Gregory Evans, it is an

excellent demonstration of what can be done with audio. Such techniques as narration, flashbacks, even voice-overs – contrasting what a character is thinking with what he is saying – are unobtrusively employed, elevating this tale well above its hackneyed premise.

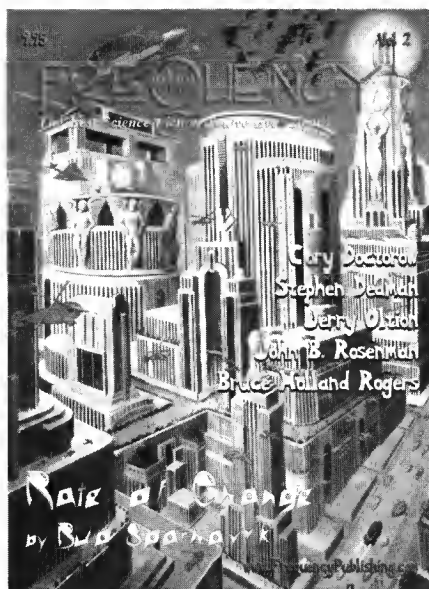
As a bonus, there's an accompanying interview, which was recorded for *Front Row* in 1998. It's recent enough to be fairly up to date, but it predates the unpleasant business with the van. This is fortunate, because if that had dominated the discussion, we might have heard less about his life, his opinions, and his approach to writing. I was especially amused by the accu-

sation that too many of King's characters are authors. King's defence – that Dick Francis's characters are all jockeys – is perhaps a case of deliberately missing the point, but what the hey.

Gregory Evans also adapted *Pet Sematary*, which was broadcast as six episodes in 1997. In terms of performance it's every bit as good as *Secret Window*, but this time it benefits from being based on a much more interesting story. I came to it fresh, unfamiliar with film or book, but was quickly engaged by the atmosphere of creeping unease, and characters I really cared about. I listened to the play in a single sitting, and strongly recommend the experience – though it might be best to leave it a while if you've been recently bereaved.

Secret Window, Secret Garden (two tapes, 1hr 55 min) and *Pet Sematary* (two tapes, 2hr 50 min) £8.99 each from BBC Radio Collection.

There's a newish audio magazine from the United States called *Frequency*, which describes itself as "The Best Science Fiction You've Ever Heard" and which features short stories read by actors. Volume 1 Issue 0 (\$8.95) is a double CD featuring five Hugo-nominated stories from 2000, kicking off with "Ancient Engines" by Michael Swanwick. It's read by Gil Gerard, with occasional background sound effects. The story is little more than a conversation about immortality, but it's a surprisingly interesting conversation to listen in on. In "Macs" by Terry Bisson, a community in Oklahoma take their revenge on a child-killer, the killer having been cloned so that they can all have a go. The story consists of a series of interviews with the diverse members of the community, each one skilfully voiced by Peter Dillard. Because they are describing the same events, there is a lot of repetition, but this is no bad thing, as it



gives the story a compelling rhythm that makes repeated listenings possible if not exactly enjoyable. Chilling, unforgettable, and ideally suited to audio. That's followed by another Swanwick story, "Scherzo with Tyrannasaur" [sic], about an exclusive restaurant in the Cretaceous patronized by time travellers. Read by Tim Klein, this is an oddly straightforward tale of dinosaurs and time paradoxes. It's difficult to avoid comparison with Douglas Adams's rather less po-faced *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*.

On the second disc, Laura Brodian Freas reads Nicholas Dichario's "Sarajevo." A century in the future, the atrocities visited on that city are being miraculously played out over and over again. Nobody questions the miracle, but the tourist industry cashes in on it. Mike Resnick's "Hothouse Flowers," read by Patrick Stinson, discusses the issue of quality of life versus length of life. It's amiable, but doesn't really say anything new.

Volume 1 and Volume 2 of *Frequency* (\$9.95; note inconsistent numbering system) are single CDs, packaged in non-brittle DVD cases. I hope other audio producers follow their example, because in my experience the other kind of packaging almost always seems to break in the post. We're told nothing about the publishing history of these stories, though I would guess that most of them first appeared in *Asimov's SF*, and I'd guess most are fairly recent – although I distinctly remember reading Stan Schmidt's "Panic" back in 1978! The five stories in Issue 1 have their moments, but (unsurprisingly) they are not up to the standard of the Hugo nominees. Ray Vukcevic's "Problem Solved," for instance, is a

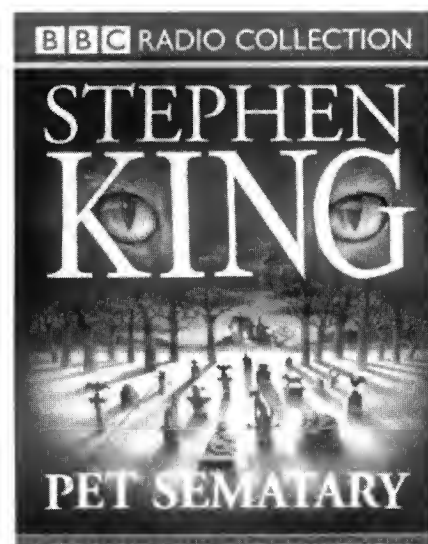
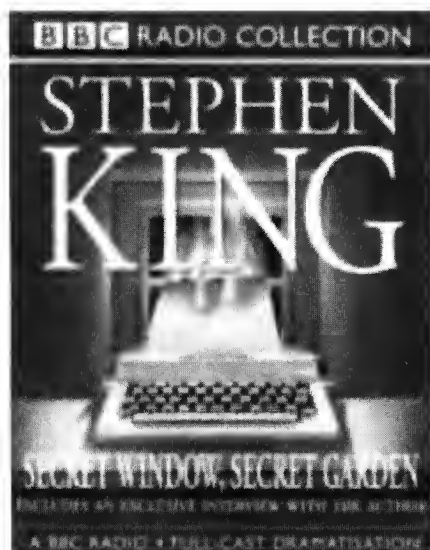
not-terribly-funny story about cockroaches – perhaps you have to be plagued by the things to really appreciate it. John Serna's "User Error" is another attempt at humour; trouble is, the punchline is thoroughly worked out within the first two minutes of a 13-minute story.

Kurt Roth's "Rift" takes the form of a recorded message sent by a space-going female soldier to her naïve lover. The reading by Kathy Christopherson is effective enough; unfortunately the story draws comparisons between cosmic phenomena and personal concerns, which in my experience always results in bathos. "Panic," read by J. R. Esposito, is this issue's one really successful attempt at straight humour – unusually, it's a story about audio sf. Stephen Dedman's "Honest Ghosts," read by Tim Klein, is an entertaining horror story about a horror writer. (Does anyone know why the horror genre is so incestuous?)

The six stories on Volume 2 begin with an archaic-style fantasy by Bruce Holland Rogers called "Apple Golem," about a wizard who creates a woman using the sort of materials you might find in an orchard. "House Calls" by Jerry Olton is another fairly successful attempt at humour, greatly assisted by Alistair Logan's portrayal of a world-weary Irish priest. There's humour in a darker vein in "Christmas at the Chushingura Cafe," in which Stephen Dedman puts a new slant on Karaoke. Cory Doctorow's "Abbat01r" is a tiresome attempt at cyberpunk – Alyxx Ian draws the clichés. "Chance in Hell" by John B. Rosenman is a man-punishing website fantasy, and Bud Sparhawk rounds off the collection with the dizzying and accurately-titled "Rate of Change."

Details of *Frequency* can be found at the website: www.FrequencyPublishing.com.

Paul Beardsley



BOOKS RECEIVED



MARCH
2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Mark. **The Dark Remains: Book Three of The Last Rune.** Earthlight, 0-684-86042-2, 497pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Youll, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a fourth volume in the series is promised.) 26th March 2001.

Arsand, Daniel. **The Land of Darkness.** Translated by Christine Donougher. Introduction by Kate Britten. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-99-2, 194pp, B-format paperback, cover by Willi Gray, £8.99. (Historical novel, perhaps with fantasy elements; first published in France as *Lo Province des Ténèbres*, 1998; set in the 13th century, and involving a journey to the lands of Kubilai Khan, this won the Prix Femina as best first novel in its author's home country; Daniel Arsand [born 1950] is French of Turkish-Armenian extraction.) 26th April 2001.

Baldry, Cherith. **Exiled from Camelot.** Green Knight Publishing [900 Murmansk St., Suite 5, Oakland, CA 94607, USA], ISBN 1-928999-16-6, 312pp, trade paperback, cover by Richard Pace, \$14.95 [£10.99 in the UK]. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; this, by a British writer who has written several novels, is one of a small-press series we haven't heard tell of before – "Pendragon Fiction," entirely devoted to Arthuriana; the series consists of both reprinted books and new material; among other titles they have listed for this Spring are *The Pagan King* by Edison Marshall [March

2001] and *The Merriest Knight: The Collected Arthurian Tales of Theodore Goodridge Roberts*, edited by Mike Ashley [May 2001].) Lote entry: January publication, received in March 2001.

Ballard, J. G. **The Terminal Beach.** Phoenix, ISBN 0-575-40131-1, 221pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 1964; this is at least the second Orion edition – a previous one appeared under their "Indigo" imprint in 1997; it contains 12 timeless early-1960s stories, including "The Drowned Giant," "The Illuminated Man," "The Terminal Beach," "Deep End," "Billennium" and "The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon"; what more can one say? – an essential book.) 31st March 2001.

Ballard, J. G. **The Voices of Time.** Phoenix, ISBN 0-575-40130-3, 197pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published as *The Four-Dimensional Nightmare* in 1963; this is a reprint of the Dent edition of 1984 [the first to be so titled], which followed the revised contents of the Gollancz edition of 1974 [published under the old title]; eight classic stories, including "The Voices of Time," "The Garden of Time," "The Cage of Sand" and "Chronopolis" – still among the best sf ever written.) 31st March 2001.

Bunch, Chris. **Corsair.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-034-2, 406pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; its commended by Terry Brooks as "a hard-edged, salty brew of pirates, treasure maps and sea battles"; hmm – where's the fantasy in that?) 5th April 2001.

Card, Orson Scott. **Heartfire: The Tales of Alvin Maker V.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-032-6, 336pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 134; appearing in Britain for the first time, three years late, it's part of a series about an alternate, magical 19th-century America that's often reckoned to be Card's best work.) 5th April 2001.

Clarke, Arthur C., and Stephen Baxter. **The Light of Other Days.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224753-4, 312pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone & Bob Warner, £9.99. (Sf

novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it looks as though it has been written mainly by Baxter – who may well be Clarke's ideal "collaborator" – and it's dedicated "To Bob Shaw," who wrote a famous short story of the same title in the 1960s.) 8th May 2001.

Clute, John. **Appleseed.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-758-7, 337pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the author's second novel, after a 20-odd-year gap, and his first sf novel – an out-and-out space opera; Stephen Baxter, Joe Haldeman and M. John Harrison all commend it on the cover; see the interview with John Clute in *Interzone* 166, and see also the review by David Mathew in that issue.) 12th April 2001.

Cole, Stephen. **Vanishing Point.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53829-5, 278pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; see also below, under Justin Richards and Stephen Cole.) April 2001.

Constantine, Storm. **The Crown of Silence.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87329-8, 431pp, hardcover, cover by Doug Beekman, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK as *Crown of Silence* [no definite article], 2000; follow-up to *Seo Drogon Heir* [1999] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" series.) 20th March 2001.

Farland, David. **Wizardborn.** "Book Three of The Runelords." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86741-7, 428pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; "David Farland" is a pseudonym of sf writer Dave Wolverton, who lives in the state of Utah; the British edition of this novel [Simon & Schuster/Earthlight] preceded by a month.) 16th April 2001.

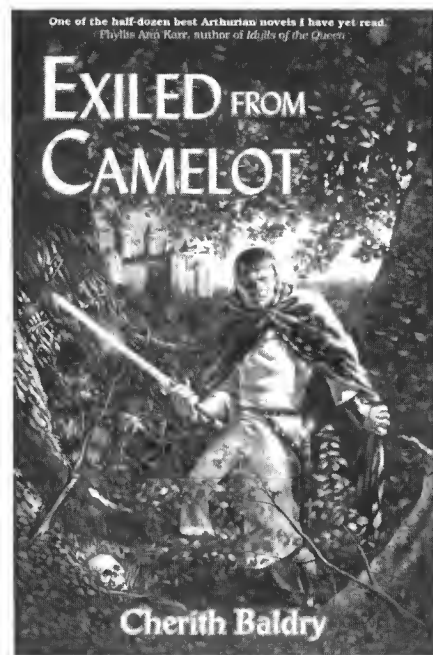
Feintuch, David. **Children of Hope.** "The All-New Novel in the Bestselling Seafort Saga." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00804-6, 503pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Herring, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; seventh in the popular military space-opera series which has so often been compared to C. S. Forester's "Hornblower" saga.) April 2001.

Gemmell, David. **Ravenheart.** "Book Three of The Rigante." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43226-6, 404pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; proof copy received; the forthcoming American edition of the following item; note that Del Rey don't use the middle initial "A" in Gemmell's name as given on the title page.) 3rd July 2001.

Gemmell, David A. **Ravenheart.** "A Novel of the Rigante." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04438-X, 384pp, hardcover, cover by John Bolton, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Sword in the Storm* [1998] and *Midnight Folk* [1999] in Gemmell's Celtic-flavoured heroic fantasy series.) 5th April 2001.

Greenwood, Ed. **The Vacant Throne: A Tale of the Band of Four.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86722-0, 332pp, hardcover, cover by Todd Lockwood, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *The Kingless Lord* [2000]; Greenwood is an erstwhile "Forgotten Realms" gaming-fantasy writer.) 20th April 2001.

Harrison, Harry. **50 in 50: A Collection of Short Stories, One for Each of Fifty Years.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87789-7, 623pp, hard-



cover, \$29.95. (5f collection, first edition; proof copy received; a welcome 50th anniversary volume by a veteran American writer; with its autobiographical introduction and brief header notes to each thematic section, the blurb describes it as "at once a memoir, a compendium of a singularly engaging body of work, and a look at the history of science fiction in the second half of the twentieth century"; that's a bit of an exaggeration, but it's certainly a substantial collection of the author's best stories.) June 2001.

Hawk, Pat. **Hawk's Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Series & Sequels**. Edited by Donna Hawk. Hawk's Enterprises [149 CR 2202, Greenville, TX 75402-4988, USA], ISBN 0-9643185-4-7, 499+42+114pp, large-format ringbound softcover, \$55.95. (Bibliography of sf/fantasy series, arranged alphabetically by series title and indexed by individual book titles and author names; first edition; this seems admirably full and up-to-date: "over 17,000 titles for over 3,900 series are included covering over 5,000 authors and by-lines"; it's available by post for an additional \$6 in the USA, or \$10 overseas; e-mail hawk@coyote.com for more details; Hawk also publishes other interesting materials on CD-Rom, including his magnum opus to date, *Hawk's Authors' Pseudonyms III* [1999].) No date shown: received in March 2001.

Haydon, Elizabeth. **Prophecy: Child of Earth**. "The epic fantasy for the Third Millennium." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07028-3, 465pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this new writer, apparently American [although we are told only that she "lives and works in America," which leaves open the possibility that she is of other nationality], seems to be doing well; this is only her second novel, following *Rhapsody: Child of Blood* [1999], but already her work has been sold to Hollywood for possible filming; perhaps she enjoys some sort of *Godfather* connection – "the late Mario Puzo" is mentioned in the acknowledgments.) 15th March 2001.

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **Lord of Emperors: Book II of The Sarantine Mosaic**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0825-X, 531pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bill Gregory £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Canada [?], 2000; a "fantasy upon themes of Byzantium" and the concluding volume of a diptych.) 26th March 2001.

Lancaster, Kurt, and Tom Mikotowicz, eds. **Performing the Force: Essays on Immersion into Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Environments**. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0895-2, viii+207pp, trade paperback, \$32. (Anthology of essays on "participatory" forms of sf and fantasy; first edition; various academic contributors write under such headings as "Performing the Myth of SF's Popular Culture Icons," "Performing in Computer Games," "Webpages as Sites of Immersion," "Interactive Movies," "Marketing and Playing with Action Figures," "Performing in Role-Playing Games" and "Environmental Fantasies"; co-editor Kurt Lancaster [born 1967] wrote an earlier McFarland book on the subject,

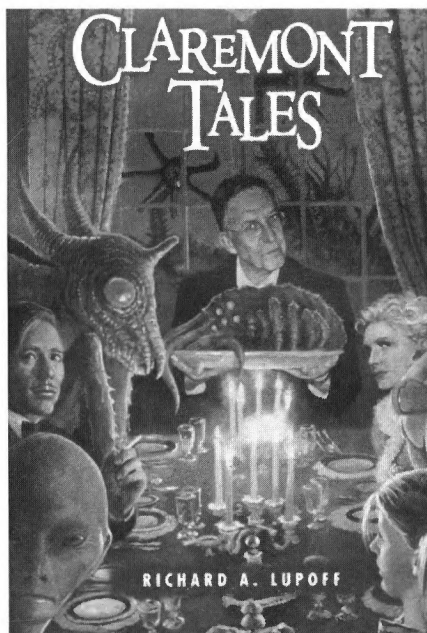
Warlocks and Wopdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainments with Interactive and Virtual Environments [1999], which was reviewed by Tim Robins in *Interzone* 155.) March 2001.

Laymon, Richard. **Night in the Lonesome October**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-2053-0, 346pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; this may be the last novel from Laymon, as he died suddenly a few months ago, in his early 50s; the title, which has been used before, comes from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe.) 26th April 2001.

Lisle, Holly. **Courage of Falcons**. "The Secret Texts, Book 3." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07086-2, xxi+405pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this is Lisle's third book to appear in Britain, although she has published quite a number of earlier titles in America.) 15th March 2001.

Lupoff, Richard A. **Claremont Tales**. Illustrated by Nicholas Jainschigg. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-00-2, xv+290pp, hardcover, cover by Jainschigg, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy/crime fiction collection, first edition; it contains a dozen stories by a writer who, as the blurb states, "refuses to be restricted to any genre; his stories range from Sherlockian mysteries to alternate universes in fast-forward, Walter Mitty-esque escape into the world of software, Cthulhu Mythos tales, and the surprising price of eternal life"; the stories, mainly from the 1980s and 1990s though some are earlier, are reprinted from magazines such as *Amazing*, *F&SF* and *Weird Tales*, as well as more diverse sources like *Omni* Online and various original anthologies; recommended.) April 2001.

Marillier, Juliet. **Son of the Shadows**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-84880-3, xi+462pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2000; proof copy received; this is "Book Two of the Sevenwaters Trilogy," although the American proof doesn't state that on its title page; romantic Celtic fantasy.) May 2001.



Miéville, China. **Perdido Street Station**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-44302-0, 710pp, trade paperback, \$18. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; proof copy received; the author's second novel, following *King Rat*, it has been praised by John Clute, Jonathan Carroll, M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock, Brian Stableford and many others, and has been shortlisted for this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 155.) 1st March 2001.

Nix, Garth. **Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr**. HarperCollins (USA), ISBN 0-06-027823-4, xv+479pp, hardcover, \$16.95. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a sequel to *Sabriel* [which we don't recall seeing], it comes with praise from Lloyd Alexander and Philip Pullman.) 11th April 2001.

Norton, Andre, and Rosemary Edghill. **Leopard in Exile: Carolus Rex, Book II**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86428-0, 347pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *The Shadow of Albion* [1999], it's set during "a Regency that never was" and, like the previous book, is presumably almost entirely the work of Rosemary Edghill; this one seems to be set mainly in the American colonies, and features the Marquis de Sade as a villain.) April 2001.

Norton, Andre, and Sasha Miller. **Knight or Knaves: The Book of the Oak**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87337-9, 318pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *To the King's Daughter* [2000] in "The Cycle of Oak, Yew, Ash, and Rowan"; although billed as a collaboration, it's probably more of a sharecrop [i.e. largely written by the junior partner, Sasha Miller] – Andre Norton, whose first novel appeared in 1934, is getting very elderly.) June 2001.

Pohl, Frederik, ed. **The SFWA Grand Masters, Volume Three**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86877-4, 477pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains four or five stories apiece by Lester del Rey, Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, A. E. van Vogt and Jack Vance – the third group of five winners of the Science Fiction Writers of America's "Grand Master" award; of the five masters represented here, two – Lester del Rey [real name Leonard Knapp, as Pohl alleges] and A. E. van Vogt – are now deceased; as with the first and second volumes, it's a worthy anthology of [inevitably] familiar material.) April 2001.

Rabe, Jean, and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Historical Hauntings**. DAW, ISBN 0-88677-992-8, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$6.99. (Ghost-story anthology, first edition; it contains 18 all-original ghostly tales on historical themes by Gene DeWeese, Roland J. Green, Lisanne Norman, Andre Norton, Bruce Holland Rogers, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Michael A. Stackpole, Brian W. Thomsen and others; it's one of a long series of such paperback-original sf, fantasy and horror anthologies produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books; since they seem to appear monthly, consist of all-new material, offer opportunities to new writers, and are cheaply published [in today's terms], it's tempting to think of these books as constituting a latter-day



pulp magazine – each “issue” of which is pleasingly thick, just like the early pulps of the 1910s and 1920s.) *March 2001.*

Resnick, Mike. **The Outpost.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85485-4, 383pp, hardcover, \$24.95.

(Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; states the blurb: “on the planet Henry II, orbiting the twin suns of Plantagenet and Tudor, at the very edge of the great black hole at the center of the Milky Way, there is a tavern, *The Outpost*.”) *May 2001.*

Richards, Justin, and Stephen Cole. **The Shadow in the Glass.** “Doctor Who.” BBC, 0-563-S3838-4, 286pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Sixth Doctor and the Brigadier; this is one of two “Doctor Who” novels that new writer Stephen Cole has out in the same month [see above].) *April 2001.*

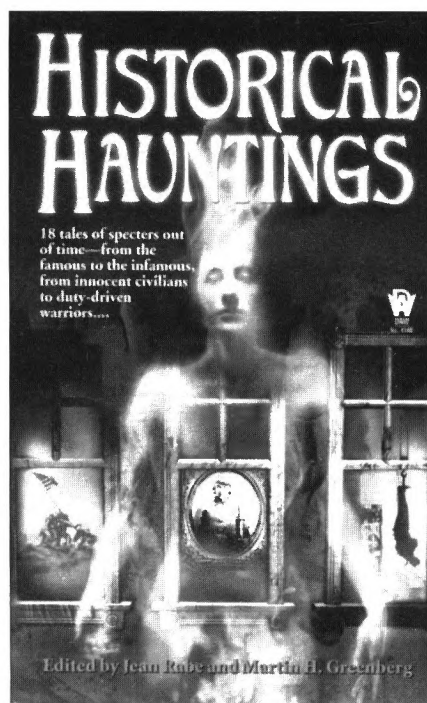
Rochelle, Warren G. **Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin.** “Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies.” Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-886-3, xii+195pp, C-format paperback, £15.95. (Critical study, from a “mythic” perspective, of Le Guin’s sf and fantasy; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32.95 [not seen]; parts of the book were first published as essays in *Extrapolation* in the 1990s; the author is an academic in Fredericksburg, Virginia, who, we are told, has a first novel, *The Wild Bay*, due out in 2001.) It states “October 2000” on the review slip, but we don’t believe that [the book is copyrighted “2001”]; received in *March 2001.*

Shinn, Sharon. **Heart of Gold.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00821-6, 341pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000.) *April 2001.*

Shinn, Sharon. **Summers at Castle Auburn.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00803-8, 355pp, trade paperback, cover by Jean Pierre Targete, \$14.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; in the USA there appears to be a growing popular crossover genre of fantasy-romance [“romance” in the modern sense of love stories aimed mainly at women readers], and this is an example: Sharon Shinn comes with praise from both Peter S. Beagle and *The Romantic Times*.) *May 2001.*

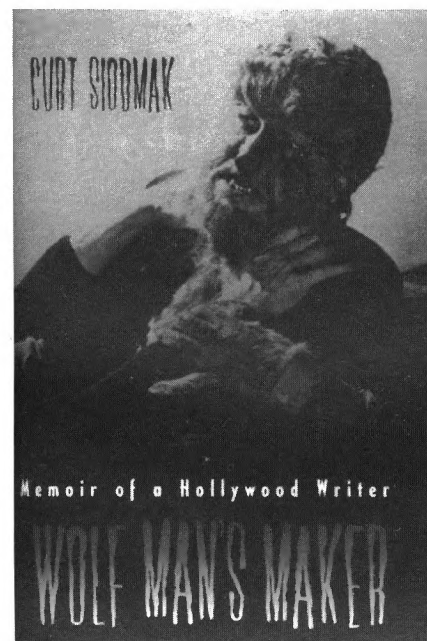
Shippey, T. A. J. **R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century.** Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0-618-12764-X, xxxv+347pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Critical study of Tolkien’s fantasy writings, first published in the UK, 2000; proof copy received; the author’s name is given as Tom Shippey on the cover and spine [but not on the title page, where it matters most]; this is a follow-up to his excellent book, *The Road to Middle-Earth* [1982; revised 1992]; as in that earlier work, Professor Shippey places Tolkien’s fantasies in their 19th-century “philological” context as well as in a wider context of 20th-century imaginative literature; recommended.) *16th May 2001.*

Siodmak, Curt. **Wolf Man’s Maker: Memoir of a Hollywood Writer.** Revised edition. Foreword by Hans-Helmut Prinzler. “Filmmakers Series, No. 78.” Scarecrow Press, ISBN 0-8108-3870-2, xxii+457pp, hardcover,



£42.75. (Autobiography of a well-known German-American screenwriter and sf novelist, first published in the USA as *Even a Man Who is Pure in Heart...*, 1997; this is the retitled American second edition of 2001 with a UK price and publication date specified, available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; Curt Siodmak [1902-2000], brother of the movie director Robert Siodmak [1900-1973], was best known to sf readers as the author of the novel *Donovan’s Brain* [1943], but he also had a long career as a scriptwriter [and occasional director] in Hollywood, mainly associated with horror movies such as *The Wolf Man* [1941]; he has many a tale to tell.) *24th May 2001.*

Stover, Matthew. **Blade of Tyshalle.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42144-2, 725pp, trade paperback, cover by Dave McKean, \$16. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; yet another



hefty brute of a Big Commercial Fantasy novel, by an action-man writer who is deeply into the martial arts; among others [who, rather alarmingly, include “Aleister and Friedrich”], the book is dedicated to “Roger and Fritz and both Bobs (Robert A. and Robert E.)”; the author’s previous novels were bylined Matthew Woodring Stover, but he now seems to have dropped the middle name.) *3rd April 2001.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **The Fresco.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07192-3, 406pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £10.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 2000; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the plot involves alien visitations on Earth, and the fate of an impoverished Hispanic woman who acts as intermediary.) *15th March 2001.*

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Ring of Five Dragons: Volume One of The Pearl Saga.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224729-1, 616pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; a Big Commercial Fantasy which seems to be set on another planet; the author has restored the original “Van” to his name, after several years of publishing simply as “Eric Lustbader.”) *8th May 2001.*

Walker, Stephen. **Mr Landen Has No Brain.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648381-X, 309pp, A-format paperback, cover by Robin Cracknell, £5.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first edition; a second novel by the Sheffield-born author of *Danny Yates Must Die* [1999]; it’s set in a town called “Wyndham-on-Sea.”) *17th April 2001.*

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Well of Darkness: The Sovereign Stone Trilogy, Book 1.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648614-2, 599pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin McKenna, £5.99. (Fantasy game spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2000; according to an acknowledgment note, it’s based on a world created by the artist Larry Elmore which has also inspired a role-playing game devised by Lester Smith and Don Perrin.) *17th April 2001.*

Williams, Tad. **Sea of Silver Light: Otherland, Volume Four.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-991-1, xxxviii+922pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, £17.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; concluding volume in the virtual-reality tetralogy; Williams’s books seem to get ever bigger – it’s a wonder they could fit this one into a single set of covers.) *19th April 2001.*

Wooding, Chris. **The Haunting of Alai-abel Cray.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-99896-4, vi+338pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Juvenile “gaslight romance” horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the prolific 23-year-old Chris Wooding’s first sizeable book, and probably his first hardcover – “inspired by *Gammeghast* and H. P. Lovecraft,” says the publicity letter; “a Gothic adventure set in Victorian London”; born 1977, Wooding has already published at least four slimmer kids’ novels plus the multi-part “Broken Sky” serial novel, all in the past three or four years: he seems to be settling in for the long haul and possibly a big career.) *15th June 2001.*

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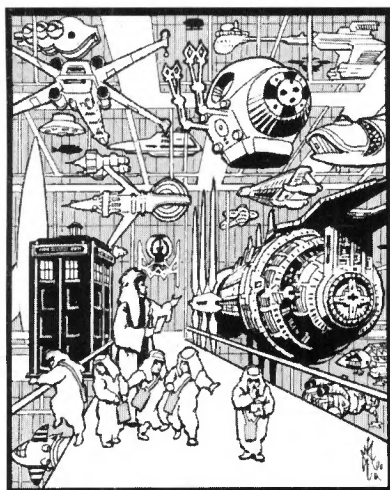
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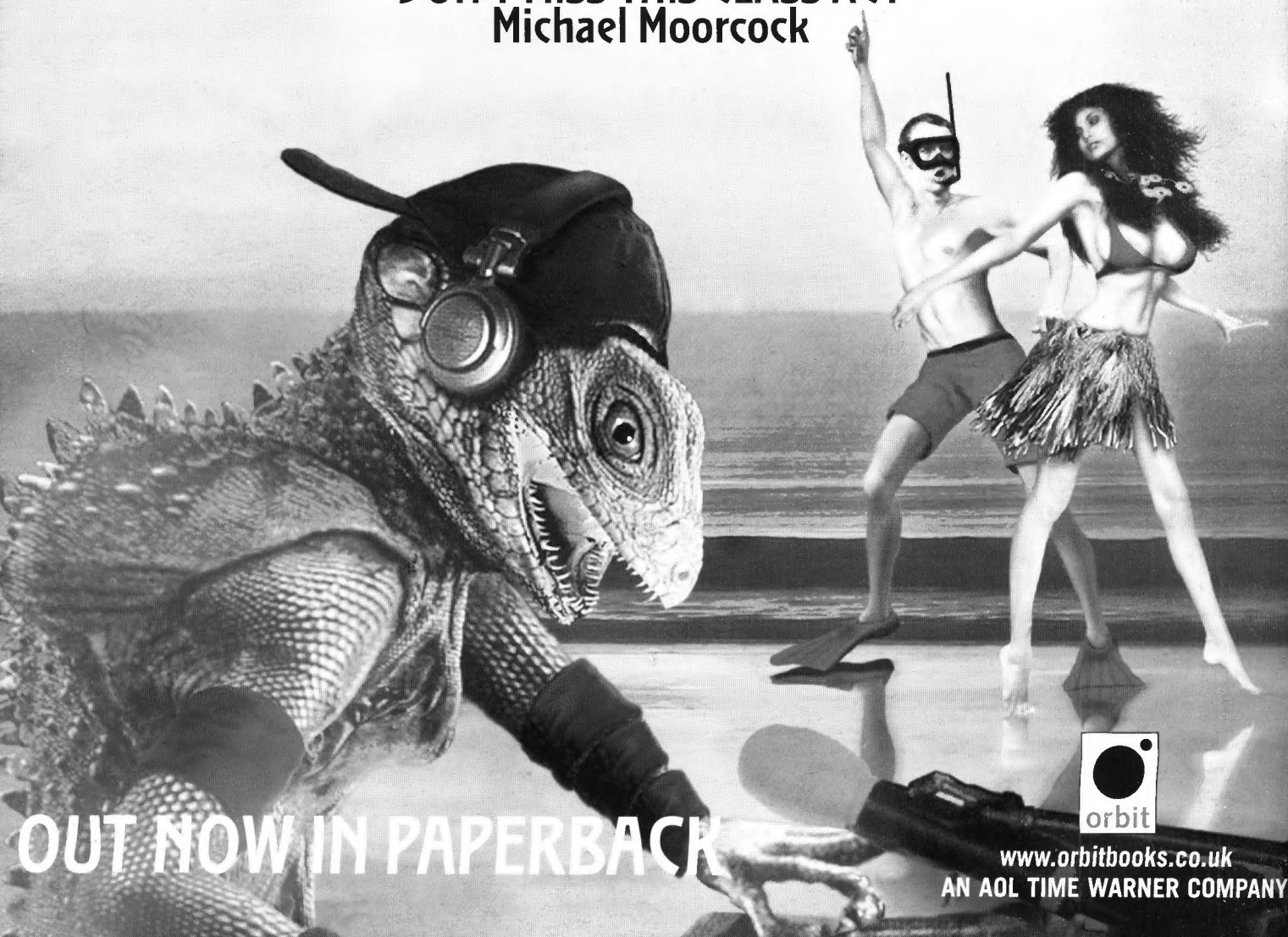
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